



**Marxism and Transgender Liberation:
Confronting Transphobia in the British Left**



Red Fightback

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*Every emancipation
is a restoration
of the human world.
— Karl Marx*

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Foreword

CW: transphobia, sexual abuse, ableism, racism

In early 2018, I decided to bite the bullet and find a revolutionary party to join. It is a necessary thing for any communist to do: to find others who share your beliefs to struggle alongside, in an organised way that can achieve what the world so desperately needs. Any attempt to organise on your own, without people to guide and support each other, or without a connection to real people, is a dead end.

In Britain, the options are limited. Parties rotten with untreated sexual harassment cases, where men covered up their mates' disgusting behaviours at the cost of the safety of others, mouldy with opportunists valuing ease rather than work, dizzy on a merry-go-round of newspapers, directionless demos and blood bonds to a failed and imperialist Labour Party. It is a dire state of affairs. So, for lack of alternative I turned to the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), then without some of the infamy they have now. I never became a member (they require at least a year's support and fees before they will consider you), but I attended two meetings. The first was broadly unremarkable and rather uninspiring. In the second, I said that I was transgender, specifically non-binary, and use they/them pronouns. The group of members responded by collectively guessing my genitals. One called me a 'liberal fascist' and a 'naïve child', and another remarked that I handle abuse well, and mused that the reason for this was due to childhood trauma. Suffice to say, I never came back.

I wish my experience was an outlier, a cause for alarm sweeping across groups, organisations and parties on the British left. Instead, it is only one of so many stories of transphobia—or perhaps a line in one singular story. Months later, the CPGB-ML published their line decreeing that LGBT* oppression does not exist.

Marxism and Transgender Liberation: Confronting Transphobia in the British Left is the response to transphobia that we need in this vital moment

in the struggle for transgender liberation. Amongst many things, it articulates the conditions in which we experience such severe abandonment and isolation. So many of us feel this way—particularly as transgender, non-binary, intersex and otherwise gender non-conforming people. We are scapegoated and gaslit, terrorised and depicted as terrorists, beaten and abused, murdered and forgotten. We turn to the left for support, in a nation where lesbians and gays supported the miners and the miners led a pride parade in response, and find nothing. The liberal left offers at best hollow words, enacting the same hatred and violence as those they barely claim to oppose. Many on the far left offer crude ‘materialism’ as their grounds for perpetuating these oppressive structures, and claim to break with capitalism despite not challenging its transphobia, racism, ableism, misogyny or homophobia. This pamphlet thoroughly exposes the analytical incoherency and moral deficiency within so much of this supposed left; their position, which is plainly morally corrupt, is proved to also be analytically impossible.

Not long after my experience with the CPGB-ML, I saw tweets they posted attempting to pick a fight with a plucky new group called Red Fightback. They accused Red Fightback of being too pro-trans. This was a ringing endorsement, and I applied to join. That Party, which I am now in, is one which heralds the values of this pamphlet.

This text shows what Marxism can do: unwavering solidarity towards the transgender community, rooted in an analysis that holds up and is motivated by solidarity. We can and must learn about the history of transgender people, our origins and our trajectory. This work, which looks at transgender people throughout history and in the present day, casts an intelligent and sympathetic eye and highlights our struggles. Simply put, it is one of the most sophisticated texts on transgender liberation that I have encountered. It looks directly at transphobia, for we must understand what those who oppose our freedom say in detail; it is at times uncomfortable to read, but it is necessary for the fight. If you struggle with the content, I encourage you to read with loved ones or comrades to lean on, be it for emotional support or help with the reading itself. This text was in part written collectively, and should be read likewise. And finally, the pamphlet shows that Marxism-Leninism is, at its heart, about the liberation of all

people everywhere. The likes of the Socialist Workers' Party, the CPGB-ML, the Labour Party and so many others have tarnished what it means to be a revolutionary socialist—it is about time that we restore honour to that name and remind people that to be a socialist is to be a tireless fighter for liberation.

Despite a bleak outlook, the situation is not hopeless; not only is transgender liberation featured in socialist struggles across the world, but this text itself is part of the fightback we are all desperately due. A spark of hope in the dark, that cuts through the malaise and lies in order to firmly reject hatred and error, in the name of solidarity and belief in the masses of the world. In that name, we must build revolutionary movements that do better than those we see around us. The vision is this: build in communities and workplaces, doing the hard work to grow trust by fighting side-by-side with the working classes and those people most oppressed by capitalism, transgender people included. Build a party that is safe and secure for members, to be a home for the politically homeless. A party where we have each other's backs, a party of the working class, and a party of the oppressed.

Revolutionary communism and liberation for all.

TI

Chair of the Central Committee

Red Fightback

Introduction

It is a strange time to be a socialist in Britain. Globally, class struggle is on the upsurge, with revolutionary and anti-imperialist uprisings in Chile, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon and Ecuador, as well as new radical movements in western countries pushing back against decades of brutal austerity, including the yellow and black vests in France. During a time that calls for a convergence of anti-capitalist struggles against exploitation and oppression, swathes of the British left are preoccupied with the moral panic against transgender people (including non-binary gender people), with many parroting the same hateful rhetoric used against gay people in the 1960s-80s. The Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), which likens trans people to 'a circle identifying as a square', only represents an extreme, farcical expression of the transphobia which is systemic across the left—including in the trade union movement, the Labour Party, and the Communist Party of Britain (CPB).

As a cisgender person (i.e., my present gender identity corresponds with my birth-assigned 'sex'), I cannot speak about the hardships of anti-trans oppression from experience. My purpose in writing this pamphlet is to systematically show the incoherence of the transphobic worldview, demonstrate that transphobia is a central facet of the international fascist resurgence, and provide a cogent revolutionary-Marxist account of gender. I draw heavily on transgender Marxist and Marxist-Leninist writers, including Alyson Escalante and Jules Gleeson, in addition to classical Marxism.

The first section addresses the question of the origins of gender hierarchies. Transphobic 'feminists' claim that patriarchy is determined by 'biological sex' and is thus a 'natural' occurrence. But decades of ethnographical data contradict the premise that clear-cut gender roles existed in early human hunter-gatherer societies—a belief still shaping dogmatic Marxist accounts of women's oppression, including in most Trotskyist groups. A profound anti-intellectualism pervades most of the contemporary British left. I follow Marxist feminists Eleanor Leacock and Sandra Bloodworth in arguing that

pre-class human societies were even more egalitarian than Marx and Engels realised, and that the creation of defined gender roles which accompanied the advent of original class relations and new social divisions of labour represented a qualitative, rather than merely quantitative, shift in human existence. The hard gender binary, associated with the nuclear family and the separation of productive and reproductive spheres, only really solidified during the transition to capitalism in Europe, and colonialism abroad progressively distorted or destroyed more flexible kinship models.

Section II explains what it means to say that sex is socially constructed, which is not the same as ignoring biology, or implying that bodily rights do not matter. Patriarchal (and imperialist) ideologies heavily influenced the development of modern western science and shaped the creation of a hard 'sex' binary. 'Social construct' does not mean non-existent: race is also socially constructed and has major, devastating, real-life ramifications. The transphobic belief that people are fundamentally divided by sex essence (sex essentialism) is not only out of step with the genetic complexity of sexual traits in humans: it also typically carries traditional misogynistic assumptions, reinforcing spurious notions about gendered hormones and brains, in addition to having harmful consequences for both trans and intersex people (people born with atypical variations in sexual characteristics).

Section III provides a consistent and systematised Marxist account of subjective gender identity and elucidates the inextricability of the biological and social realms. It shows the superficiality of transphobic arguments contrasting 'real' sex with 'illusory' gender. Transphobic 'Marxists' have fallen into the centuries-old trap of vulgar mechanical materialism, which is contrasted to the 'dialectical materialism' of Marx and Engels.

Section IV explains why, all of a sudden, TERFs—Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists—have become a prominent part of the British feminist mainstream. The rise of transphobia has accompanied the worrying resurgence of fascism and neoconservatism, not only in the US but also across Europe and beyond. That TERFs rely on crude biological determinism—a doctrine inextricably tied to the history of colonialism and eugenics—makes them natural allies of race science proponents, and indeed

many high-profile TERFs are explicitly racist. Firm links exist between TERF groups and far-right networks, think tanks and media outlets—which are all typically anti-abortion rights, and staunchly anti-LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex). The section also addresses the issue of transphobes appealing to ‘common sense’. The most vocal middle-class transphobes claim to be speaking for an ‘authentic’ working-class constituency, while preaching their hateful and violence-provoking beliefs from established media platforms. Transphobes paint trans people as privileged attention seekers, but the majority of trans people, in Britain and globally, comprise a particularly marginalised segment of the working class. Dogmatic Marxists claim that acknowledging differences among working-class people is divisive, but it is they who divide the working class against itself, by pretending its constituent elements (women, racialised minorities, LGBTI+ people, the disabled) don’t exist.

Finally, the concluding section outlines the current stakes of transgender liberation. It points out that actual socialist movements and governments in the Global South, notably in Cuba, are making great strides on LGBTI+ issues, through revolutionary-humanist approaches committed to transforming human relations and eroding social oppressions in tandem with the revolutionising of the state and economic life. In the British context, I argue postmodernist pro-LGBT ‘symbolic resistance’, emanating from academia and divorced from any class perspective, is futile. The other strategic dead-end is social reformism, presently represented by the Labour Party, which has consistently shown its willingness to throw trans people under the bus, in addition to failing ([even under Corbyn’s leadership](#)) to present an anti-capitalist alternative capable of challenging the exploitation and degradation of the working class. If it hopes to succeed, the left must adopt a totalising class viewpoint, attuned to the necessity of confronting the overarching capitalist state (whether Labour or Tories are at the helm), while simultaneously championing battles against racism, transphobia, misogyny and [ableism](#) etc., and in the process fostering true working-class unity.

I - Class Origins of Gender

For TERFs and their allies, women's oppression is rooted in biological 'sex', hence it is 'natural'. The TERF group Woman's Place UK claims women are 'a distinct sex class' and that 'sex defines our destiny'. ^[1] The latter is, of course, a position long held by proponents of patriarchy. 'Radical feminism' doesn't necessarily imply radicalism in any meaningful sense, it just refers to a specific strand of feminism that emerged in the 1960s, which posits patriarchy as a universal system of oppression whereby women are a sex-class or -caste. Radical feminists are often sex essentialist, meaning they view biological sex as the fundamental essence of a universal maleness and femaleness. This position has long been criticised by socialist feminists for failing to recognise the historical, class-related causes of women's subordination; and by Black feminists, for erasing non-western conceptualisations of gender and gender roles. The foundational radical feminist Shulamith Firestone was not anti-transgender, but the problems inherent to biological essentialism still emerged in her ludicrously reductionist claim that 'racism is sexism extended'. ^[2] As I show in section IV, TERFs' sex essentialism is frequently coupled with explicit racism.

Biological essentialism is an ideology that was rejected by Marx and Engels over a century ago. Marx and Engels outlined the historical development of patriarchy and the gendered division of labour—although, being products of their time, they still held a number of sex essentialist assumptions, and thus the classical Marxist theory of women's oppression needs updating. But today, many British Marxists have become active proponents of biological determinism. Claims about women's oppression are made without any engagement with the Marxist-feminist tradition, or with the broader ethnographical literature, demonstrating a culture of profound anti-intellectualism. For instance, Marxist computer scientist William Paul Cockshott, in four very tedious articles attempting to defend sex essentialism, does not engage with any Marxist feminist theorists, yet he claims to draw legitimacy from 'the feminist community' who are apparently uniformly anti-transgender. Cockshott, who attacks trans rights on the grounds that 'women don't have d**ks', currently has a book deal

with respected Marxist publisher Monthly Review and was invited to speak at the 2019 London Historical Materialism conference. ^[3]

British Marxism has been decimated since the 1980s, due to reversals associated with the global neoliberal counterrevolution and the loss of the Soviet Union. While presently the class struggle is everywhere on the upswing, in Britain newer comrades have inherited a smattering of small surviving socialist parties, often with the same dogmatic leaderships as forty years earlier who proselytise a very narrow and outdated understanding of the working class. The party leaderships are typically middle-aged and 'institutionalised'; aloof from the working poor and preoccupied with book deals, bureaucratic trade union manoeuvrings, academic or long-standing editorial positions etc. ^[4] These leaders have drawn around themselves cliques of younger sycophants, but the good news is this model doesn't appear to be sustainable, as suggested by recent exoduses in 2013 (in response to sexual abuse coverup in the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party), and from 2016-19 (in response to anti-LGBTI+ attitudes and sexual abuse apologia in the nominally Communist groups). The concluding section will reflect on how to move beyond the present impasse.

Most of the 'socialist' transphobes in Britain are grouped in the Communist Party of Britain (CPB) which, despite its revolutionary rhetoric, politically mirrors the left-wing of the pre-Blair Labour Party. The CPB was formed as a 'revolutionary' splinter from the much-larger Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), which peaked after the Second World War with around 50,000 members, and self-liquidated in 1991. While the post-war CPGB had abandoned any revolutionary challenge to the capitalist state it had at least, towards the end, begun to accept the necessity of combatting racism, sexism and anti-LGBT oppression as part of the broader class struggle. The CPB lost these creative cross-fertilising currents, but also quickly succumbed to the CPGB's reformism and support for the Labour Party, thereby losing its sole purpose for existing. The CPB is affiliated with the *Morning Star* (MS) newspaper, which still enjoys some influence in the official trade union movement, and which over the last several years has published dozens of articles on issues of sex and gender. But the CPB's actual understanding of sexism remains basically non-existent; rather, these

articles are just dedicated to transgender-bashing. A 2016 MS article by ‘radical feminist’ Jennifer Duncan attacks what she calls ‘transgender politics’ and declares: ‘Women are not oppressed based on our identities, we are oppressed on the basis of our female biology’—no explanation for this is given whatsoever, other than that ‘male and female . . . refer to the two reproductive functions of mammalian species: those who produce sperm which can fertilise ova, and those who produce ova and can bear young.’ ^[5] At the CPB’s [2018 congress](#), it was decided to defend and promote ‘sex-based rights and protections’ based on the contention that women’s oppression is caused by ‘biological sex’, and ‘reinforced by gender stereotyping’.

The British Trotskyist left is, thankfully, not overtly transphobic. Conceivably, this is because of the Trotskyist groups’ greater investment in the student movement—typically socially progressive—compared with the CPB and other nominally Communist organisations. However, serious problems still arise from the Trotskyist groups’ officially anti-feminist positions, and dogmatic adherence to some of the obsolete assumptions and mistakes found in Engels’ account of patriarchy in *Origin of the Family*. A Socialist Party of Great Britain (SPGB) [pamphlet](#) titled *Women and Socialism* states that in early human societies ‘a division of labour existed based both on age and sex. The dominant pattern was that men hunted large animals, especially where this entailed long expeditions away from the camp, and women gathered insects and plants and hunted small animals . . . since it was women who gave birth to, and suckled children (often for several years), their mobility was more restricted than men’s.’ As will be seen below, the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) promotes a similar redundant account. Cockshott also asserts, without any citation, that among early humans there was ‘a fundamental asymmetry of the sexes’. ^[6] Decades of ethnographical data have shown this model to be demonstrably false. The classical Marxist account of the origins of women’s oppression, which harbours a dangerous and misleading sex essentialism, needs revising.

Ethnological Distortions

For centuries, sexists across the political spectrum have drawn ammunition from the notion of an original 'man the hunter, woman the gatherer' division of human life. The former presumed to be competitive and inventive, the latter nurturing and docile. Darwin hypothesised that male hunters' 'great intellectual vigor and power of invention' drove the evolution of humans' large brains. ^[7] This perspective is still prevalent, even among certain 'feminists': prominent British TERF [Emma Hilton](#) (a biologist) defends sex essentialism by declaring that typically, across species, 'males are competitive and must win the favour of females'.

The assumption of a natural division of labour predicated on male competitiveness and female passivity and/or maternal instinct has long set the terms of archaeological and anthropological analysis, and only began to be challenged in the late-twentieth century. Even today, the archaeological literature is 'permeated with assumptions, assertions, and purported statements of "fact" about gender'. ^[8] In archaeology, modern gendered meaning is often retroactively applied to implements or dwelling layouts. For instance, '[m]ost stone tools are simply assumed to have been made by men'. ^[9] Archaeologist Rosemary Joyce has humorously called this the '[law of the conservation of gender](#)'. Anthropologists too have constantly imposed modern social ideologies onto the societies they study, for instance the patriarchal identification of menstrual blood as polluting has often been wrongly cast as universal across cultures. As Marxist-feminist historian [Sandra Bloodworth](#) stresses, anthropology was pioneered by 'colonial invaders and Christian zealots . . . Overwhelmingly male, they took with them the cultural and social values of capitalist society which distorted their interpretation of what they saw, especially when it came to gender relations.'

A further problem arises in the study of surviving hunter-gatherer societies, due to false premises that 'the decimated, marginalised existences of peoples pushed to the edges of their environment' by thousands of years of interaction with class societies can serve as models of original human social life. In other words, until very recently, analysis of early human gender relations was distorted by the fact that 'societies studied by anthropologists are virtually all in some measure incorporated into world economic and political systems that oppress women, and most have been involved in these

larger systems for centuries.’ ^[10] Indeed, precisely as European anthropologists began collecting data, hunter-gatherer and semi-sedentary societies were being warped by contact with the colonisers—a defining characteristic of this contact being ‘a decline in the status of women relative to men.’ ^[11] The case of the Montagnais (Innu) residing in Nitassinan (eastern Quebec and Labrador in Canada) is instructive. From the mid-sixteenth century, permanent French trading posts were established along St Lawrence Valley. Paul Le Jeune, a Jesuit missionary who lived with the Montagnais in the early-seventeenth century, described how the women held ‘great power’ and had ‘in nearly every instance . . . the choice of plans, of undertakings, of journeys, of winterings.’ When circumstance required it, Montagnais women hunted, and men looked after children. The Jesuits were tasked with converting the Montagnais not only to Christianity, but also to monogamy and patriarchy. ^[12] After a decade of colonial missionary activity and trading relations, the Montagnais had begun to institutionalise a male chiefly authority who traded with the Europeans, as well as violence against wives and children. The Montagnais became dependent on the fur trade, and animals became scarce: over time their large kinship bands were divided into smaller family units, with an increasingly rigid division of labour privileging men as fur trappers. ^[13]

The Making of Man The Hunter and Woman The Gatherer

The mythology of a universal gendered division of activity is further predicated on the manipulation of ethnographical data to conform with modern western expectations. In 1968 the hugely influential (in both popular and academic terms) book *Man the Hunter* was published; the result of a 1966 symposium of the same name. Participants in the *Man the Hunter* symposium ‘simply reclassified the pursuit of large aquatic animals as hunting rather than fishing, and they also redefined shellfishing as gathering rather than fishing . . . Hunting was more narrowly construed to highlight the pursuit of large and mobile animals . . . by narrowing the scope of “hunting,” the symposium participants eliminated women’s contributions’. ^[14] The myth of man the hunter has subsequently been

overturned by a growing ethnographic literature which “documents the simple but undeniable reality that women also hunt”, sometimes including large mammals. Contra Darwin’s model of ingenious lone-hunters, in the last several decades ethnographers have emphasised the importance of collective hunting methods involving men and women, including drives (pressing animals into surrounds or over cliffs), ambushes at river crossings, poison, snares, nets etc. ^[15] As Marxist feminist anthropologist Eleanor Leacock pointed out, the lack of clear work divisions ensured the absence of unequal or coercive class relations: ‘food and other necessities . . . were directly distributed by their producers (or occasionally, perhaps, by a parallel band member, ritualizing the sharing principle) . . . there was no differential access to resources through private land ownership’. In this context, prestige and influence was predicated on ‘wisdom and ability to contribute to group well-being.’ ^[16]

The absence of a clear gendered division of labour is sometimes even seen in Neolithic dwelling layouts, from a time when class relations had already begun to develop. For instance, at the site of [Çatalhöyük](#) in Turkey, which was occupied ca. 7400-6000 BC, archaeological interpretation and advanced DNA analysis of skeletons have found that ‘overall, there is little evidence that gender was very significant in the allocation of roles There must have been differences of lifestyle in relation to childbirth, but these differences do not seem to be related to major social distinctions’, such as ‘the transmission of rules and resources or in terms of social status and lifestyle’. Lynn Wadley, examining Stone Age sites in South Africa, suggests activities in the past may have been organised principally along lines of age, ability, or status, ‘with gender distinctions playing a comparatively minor role.’ ^[17] As Rosemary Joyce puts it, in the face of such evidence it would be false to assume that gender roles are ‘timeless, and more important than any other social distinction’. ^[18]

The absence of gender roles among early humans is further suggested by the resilience of gender equality in many (though not all) modern hunter-gatherer bands. In societies such as the !Kung of southern Africa and Mbuti peoples of tropical Congo, women until recently participated in decision-making and productive activities as equals with men, and had sexual autonomy. Among the Willow Lake Slavey nation in northwest Canada a

third of all tasks, including small mammal hunting, are performed by both female and male children and adults. [Aeta](#) women in the Philippines hunt deer and wild pig. Yup'ik women in Central Alaska 'not only directly harvested half the community food supply but also were regarded as the owners of the food as they dominated its storage, preparation and distribution'. ^[19] Wadley, as well as Caroline Bird who studies aborigine societies in Australia, have demonstrated 'indigenous women's complex and widespread involvement in a range of hunting activities, including direct harvesting [capturing and killing] of both small and large game animals, as well as toolmaking, gathering, and food processing.' Conversely, in many low-latitude environments plant gathering by men contributes significantly to the diet. ^[20]

Early human egalitarianism (or 'primitive communism'), with collective decision-making and equitable resource distribution, was based on the absence of a gendered division of labour. Lack of gender roles and monogamy was likely useful for early humans because it 'suggests a scenario where cooperation among unrelated individuals can evolve in the absence of wealth accumulation, reproductive inequalities, and intergroup warfare . . . this social system may have allowed hunter-gatherers to extend their social networks, buffering environmental risk and promoting levels of information exchange required for cumulative culture.' ^[21] As Leacock stresses, 'total interdependence' in such societies is what paradoxically determined individual autonomy and absence of coercion. ^[22]

Childrearing under Primitive Communism

The other famous tautology in popular representations of hunter-gatherer societies (one often used by sex essentialists) is as follows: 'women bear children; the early division of labor is related to this fact, as is women's present subordination; hence there has been a quantitative but not qualitative shift in women's status relative to men'. ^[23] Again, this viewpoint is indebted to colonialist ideologies. Nigerian historian [Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí](#) notes that 'western gender categories are presented as inherent in nature (of bodies) and operate on a dichotomous, binarily opposed

male/female, man/woman duality in which the male is assumed to be superior and therefore the defining category'. In recent years, archaeologists such as Hetty Jo Brumbach and Robert Jarvenpa have challenged the 'deep-seated assumption that women in prehistory were "immobilized" by pregnancy, lactation, and child care and therefore needed to be left at a home base while the males "ranged freely and widely across the landscape."' [24]

Leaving aside the fact that not all 'biological women' have children, ethnographers have long underestimated the centrality of shared childcaring for hunter-gatherers. Sex essentialists sometimes point to solitary mothering roles in other surviving great apes. Over a hundred years ago, Engels ridiculed attempts by chauvinists to draw support from non-human animal life. In response to an anthropologist's defence of the nuclear family with reference to bird monogamy (a nineteenth-century Jordan Peterson, though the latter prefers to anthropomorphise lobsters), [Engels jested](#) that 'if strict monogamy is the height of all virtue, then the palm must go to the tapeworm, which has a complete set of male and female sexual organs in each of its 50-200 proglottides, or sections, and spends its whole life copulating in all its sections with itself.' In response to TERFs, however, one could sincerely retort that 40-50% of all primates practice shared infant caring, and that bonobo chimps (with whom we share 99% of our DNA) are matriarchal, showing that motherhood does not necessitate social subordination. [25] More significant, though, is the fact that humans are set apart from all other non-extinct great apes by the absence of mothers' constant attachment to offspring. Humans produce the largest and slowest-maturing offspring of all apes, owing to our peculiarly large brains. This offers a clue to the cause of early human egalitarianism: 'Higher offspring costs would require investment from both mothers and fathers, as seen among extant hunter-gatherers. The need for biparental investment predicts increased sex equality, reflected in the high frequency of monogamy and the reproductive schedules of male hunter-gatherers, who typically stop reproducing early and exhibit long life spans after their last reproduction, in contrast to male farmers and pastoralists, whose reproductive spans extend well into late life.' [26] But mothers and fathers weren't the only childrearers. Early hominid alloparenting (caring for non-descendant children) was plausibly one basis, along with toolmaking, for the evolution

of humans' characteristic sociability. By age one, human babies develop intersubjective involvement, meaning they are concerned with what others think about them. Hunter-gatherer alloparents include both maternal and paternal kin: 'grandmothers, great-aunts, older siblings, fathers, and even visitors from neighboring groups.' [27]

Among modern hunter-gatherers there is huge variety in childcaring models, but male caring is still common. Male caregivers in the Central African Efé include fathers, brothers, cousins and less frequently grandfathers and uncles. Among the neighbouring Aka foragers, fathers are nuzzling, kissing, hugging or holding their babies 22% of the time they spend in camp, and when hunting they bring infants and other children along. [28] Filipino Aeta hunter-gatherer men are also active in childcare. The role of colonialism in disrupting these egalitarian systems can again be illustrated by the Montagnais case. The Jesuits sought to introduce corporal punishment against children and cement male patriarchal authority by eliminating polygamy and divorce right. In one instance, the Jesuit Le Jeune recalled being rebuffed by a Montagnais man: 'I told him that it was not honorable for a woman to love any one else except her husband, and that this evil being among them, he himself was not sure that his son, who was there present, was his son. He replied, "Thou hast no sense. You French people only love your own children; but we love all the children of our tribe."' In another instance, a French child struck a Montagnais adult, who demanded gifts as retribution. The French countered by explaining they would punish the child with whipping, in response to which the Montagnais 'began to pray for his pardon, alleging he was only a child'. [29]

In many societies around the globe today 'there exist customs and beliefs that help mothers elicit tolerance, protection, or assistance from men who are only possibly, rather than certainly' related to the mother's offspring. [30] Socially-conservative 'evolutionary psychologists' like Steven Pinker assert that male 'sexual jealousy' is an elementary aspect of human nature, but this is far from the truth. Take the existence of 'partible paternity'—the belief that semen from more than one person can contribute to the formation and development of a foetus—among numerous surviving hunter-gatherer societies in South America. This ideological system, which mitigates against monogamy and male control of women's reproduction, is

‘found among peoples whose cultural traditions diverged millennia ago’.

[31] Because they comprise social systems of varied kinship reciprocities, hunter-gatherers typically have a worldview of the physical environment as a 'giving' place, occupied by people likely to be well-disposed—despite the scarcity of food and dangers of predation. In class societies, by contrast, ‘a long history of patrilineally transmitted resources leaves men preoccupied with genetic paternity and puts children whose paternity is in doubt at a serious disadvantage.’ [32] Kinship models not based primarily on gender have however survived in some pre-capitalist class societies, especially prior to colonial contact. In traditional Yoruba society, social categories ‘do not rest on body type, and positioning is highly situational’:

Because the fundamental organizing principle within the [traditional Yoruba] family is seniority based on relative age, and not gender, kinship categories encode seniority not gender. . . . Hence the words *egbon* refers to the older sibling and *aburo* to the younger sibling of the speaker regardless of gender. . . . There are no single words denoting girl or boy in the first instance. With regard to the categories husband and wife, within the family the category *oko*, which is usually glossed as the English husband, is non-gender-specific because it encompasses both males and females. *Iyawo* glossed as wife, in English refers to in-marrying females. The distinction between *oko* and *iyawo* is not one of gender but distinguishes between those who are birth members of the family and those who enter by marriage. . . . This hierarchy is not a gender hierarchy because even female *oko* are superior to the female *iyawo*. . . . Thus relationships are fluid and social roles are situational continuously placing individuals in context-dependent hierarchical and non-hierarchical changing roles

In any case, as the traditional assumption of a ‘natural’ male-hunter/female-childrearer binary has been so thoroughly undermined, we need more flexible ways of thinking about gender in early human societies. The Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist), in defending a party motion against ‘identity politics’, declared that ‘Marx and Engels and Lenin and Stalin didn’t devote much attention to the politics of gender fluidity because it did not exist as an issue. This concept—contrary to the opinion of those opposed to this motion—is not “as old as humanity”.’ [33] What is the absence of a gendered division of social activity (social activity being

the essence of human existence) among early humans if not the absence of a gender binary itself? And if gender fluidity is a 'postmodern invention', how does the CPGB(ML) account for the prevalence of non-binary gender identities in pre-capitalist class societies? To list but a few: the Indonesian *bissu*; Zapotec *muxe*; Albanian *burrnesha*; Omani *khanith*; Samoan *fa'afafine*; Swahili *mashoga*, Madagascan *sekrata* and Mohave *alyha*. There is great variation in these gender roles, which cannot be encompassed by the western category of 'transgender'. They have entailed people being 'reassigned from masculine to feminine or vice versa; in other cultures, [gender variant] people have been defined as a third or even fourth gender; in still others, they have been defined as non-gendered.' While in pre-capitalist class societies these and other forms of gender/sexuality expression were rarely allowed completely free expression, it is undeniable that under colonialism and capitalism they have been subjected to unprecedentedly systematic suppression. For instance, same-gender eroticism (or what was perceived as such by Europeans) among indigenous peoples of the Americas was a major justification for the Spaniards' genocidal colonial practices, and in the Caribbean castration was used as a specific punishment for 'sodomy'. Dozens of indigenous people were also burned as "sodomites" in the Portuguese colonies. ^[34] Leslie Feinberg pointed out that laws criminalising 'same-sex' relations in India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Myanmar, Singapore and Brunei 'all have the same name—"Article 377"—because the same colonial power wrote the law: Britain.' In India *hijras*, a group with indeterminate gender expression that traditionally had a public religious role, were criminalised by the colonial authorities and misgendered as male "professional sodomites". *Hijras* remain a marginalised group in India today.

On a less extreme note than the CPGB(ML), the Trotskyist International Marxist Tendency (a successor of the Militant Tendency), in an article addressing LGBT rights, insists that 'a male/female biological sex exists in nature' and that consequently 'gender identity' also exists in nature. This is anathema to Marxism, which recognises that "social consciousness is determined by social-historical being". Gender identities cannot have existed before the advent of defined social gender roles.

The Advent of Patriarchy

In all the false assumptions of a natural gendered division of labour, 'the source of transformation in women's status is bypassed: the development of trade and specialization to the point that relations of dependence emerge outside of the band, village, or kin collective, undermine individual control and personal autonomy, and lay the basis for hierarchy.' ^[35] This problem emerged to a certain extent in Engels' *Origin*. [Engels](#) was among the first to recognise and chart the historical development of women's oppression, but his account of original patriarchy nonetheless relied on the false assumption that to 'procure the necessities of life had always been the business of the man; he produced and owned the means of doing so.' For Engels, as with today's dogmatic or ill-informed Marxists, there had always been a fundamental, natural division of labour along 'sex' lines (the difference is that, while Engels rapaciously absorbed the latest scientific advances and ethnographic data of his day, our present dogmatists ignore the wealth of evidence that has emerged since the 1970s). Engels' sex-essentialist assumptions led to an overly-mechanistic account of women's subordination: that with the productivity gains accompanying pastoralism, 'All the surplus which the acquisition of the necessities of life now yielded fell to the man'. Engels argued that the domestication of large animals produced the first surpluses above what society needed (false), and that men were automatically responsible for this work as a continuation of their 'natural' role as hunters (also false). In Britain, perhaps the most influential elaboration on Engels' account of patriarchy came from Chris Harman, who remains the foundation for theorisations of women's oppression within the Trotskyist SWP/'International Socialism' tradition. [Harman](#) provided a somewhat different account of surplus extraction to Engels, but still leaned on the wrong assumption that among early hunter-gatherers there was 'a division of labour between men and women, with men doing most of the hunting and women most of the gathering'.

The idea of a mechanical transition from a hunter-gather division of labour to a more hierarchical pastoral division of labour needs replacing. Firstly, original surpluses were not immediately accompanied by patriarchal appropriation or accumulation. Rather, as Bloodworth outlines:

the first surpluses were probably the result of better production of vegetables, fruit, grains and/or fishing, activities which no one disputes women played an active role in. Neither can men's dominance be explained by the use of the heavy plough as many argue, because class societies and women's oppression arose in the Americas before its introduction . . . Some archaeologists now argue that technological and social features formerly associated with fully settled agricultural societies, such as large sedentary populations, socio-economic inequalities, slavery, craft specialisation, etc., are evident among many communities much earlier than previously thought. These developments took off as early as 40,000 years ago in Europe and spread to many parts of the world over the next 20,000 years.

Consequently, "the major watershed in cultural development was not the domestication of plants or animals, but the emergence of the more complex societies that first occurred among hunters and gatherers". Hrdy suggests that 'unilineal—and perhaps especially patrilineal—inheritance systems began to emerge when foragers in habitats rich with marine resources began living more sedentary lives at higher population densities', as in coastal South Africa some 4,000 years ago. ^[36] Though even before then, semi-permanent and seasonal settlement among hunter-gatherers emerged at the end of the Palaeolithic, as the melting of the last ice sheets created fertile soils and marine habitats around the globe.

Leacock, and recently Bloodworth, note the agency of women in the advent of patriarchy. Before patriarchy, decisions about production and distribution, moving camp, or inter-tribal politics were decided by both adult men and women. ^[37] So, asks Bloodworth, 'why would women . . . just let the men get control? It is not credible that they played no role either in implementing some of the changes or resisting them, possibly both at different times . . . women were active participants in the development of the class divisions which led to the systematic oppression of women themselves.' Leacock made this point 40 years ago, noting the need to address 'why people accepted control by others over the products of their work and allowed the loss of their independence.' The obvious answer is that the women (and men) participating in new divisions of labour weren't aware of the full ramifications: 'through exchange and the division of labor, people [including women] were simply enriching their lives and cementing

interpersonal and intergroup bonds, innocent of the processes thereby set in motion.’ [38] Leacock here draws on Engels, who recognised of the development of new modes of production that ‘the more a social activity, a series of social processes . . . appears a matter of pure chance, then all the more surely within this chance the laws peculiar to it and inherent in it assert themselves.’ Homo sapiens first emerged 200-300,000 years ago. As Bloodworth points out, ruling classes and states were only established an estimated 8-10,000 years ago, ‘emphasising that there is nothing natural about exploitation and oppression among humans.’ Control of the first surpluses that emerged in semi-sedentary forager societies were presumably allocated to trusted individuals or religious figures, which would include women. Over time however, surplus extraction necessitated new divisions of labour. Bloodworth explains:

in more settled societies, children are potentially extra producers. There is also the need to compensate for a higher death rate, the result of a greater vulnerability to infectious diseases, and the possibility of wars over the resources which are stored. So the higher the birth rate the more successful that society is likely to be. It is in the interests of the whole society for women not to take part in activities (such as warfare, long distance travel or later heavy agricultural tasks) which expose them to the greatest risks of death, infertility or abortion.

Thus, as Leacock stressed, ‘the significance of women’s childrearing ability is transformed by new social relations when they become producers, not only of people as individuals, but also of what is becoming “abstract”—i.e., exploitable—labor.’ [39] Ruling-class women specifically would have supported patrilineality if it meant their family lineage could keep control of the wealth. And with the newly-segregated nature of women’s childbearing role, it made sense for control of production and distribution of social resources to pass through the male line. Gradually, but inexorably, ‘the sexual division of labor related to [most women’s] child-bearing ability becomes the basis for their oppression as private dispensers of services in individual households.’ [40] Significantly, not all men got control of any surplus, only those in the emerging ruling classes. The advent of patriarchy (i.e. of original class relations) was a negative experience for both men and

women, as suggested by comparisons of nutritional and skeletal health among hunter-gatherer and sedentary pastoral societies. [\[41\]](#)

It is hard to overestimate the damaging impact of the idea of a natural man-breadwinner/woman-childrearer schema. Within Marxism, particularly notable is an unfortunate line in [Origin](#) suggesting that women entering waged work would erode patriarchy: ‘now that large-scale industry has taken the wife out of the home onto the labor market and into the factory . . . no basis for any kind of male supremacy is left in the proletarian household—except, perhaps, for something of the brutality towards women that has spread since the introduction of monogamy.’ There’s an implicit assumption here that proletarian women’s continued unwaged reproductive housework (on top of waged work) is a given natural, non-antagonism. This is a belief that has persisted within numerous revolutionary movements, and been used to dismiss women’s particular struggles, with the false dogma that women entering productive/public work will automatically end sexism. [\[42\]](#) And, of course, the belief in an eternal social division of humanity determined by biological ‘sex’ is the basis of TERF ideology, as well as the refusal of many Marxists to acknowledge that the oppression of transgender people is rooted in the class-determined advent and reproduction of gender hierarchies.

The development of a rigid separation of productive and reproductive spheres during the development of capitalism, accompanied by the heightened policing of non-normative gender and sexuality expressions by the state, has already been well charted by Marxists so I won’t repeat the story here, except to note that class conflict during capitalist transition has often been accompanied by [rebellion against gender strictures](#). [\[43\]](#) In 1641, a peasant band in Wiltshire rioting against the enclosure of the forests were led by men dressed as women calling themselves ‘Lady Skimmington’. In the 1760s, the frock-wearing Irish Whiteboys were an armed popular force who tore down enclosures and demanded the restoration of communal land. In 1812, two crossdressing weavers, ‘General Ludd’s wives’, led a large crowd to destroy a loom factory in Stockport. In 1839, in the midst of Chartism, Welsh peasants protesting British road tolls cross-dressed and called themselves ‘Rebecca and her daughters’.

Today, despite the mass entrance of women into the wage-labour market (on terms less favourable than men), [women globally do the bulk of unpaid domestic work](#)—cleaning, cooking, caring for children and the elderly—ensuring the survival of the working-class families and communities who generate capitalist profits. The devaluation of reproductive labour through the construction of the naturally-subservient housewife is essential to capitalism, and this is the basis of modern transphobia (and anti-LGBTI+ oppression more broadly). It is telling that an early British anti-women’s rights tract claimed that feminists’ end goal was the imposition of ‘hermaphroditism’/the elimination of ‘sex’ distinction. [\[44\]](#)

A Brief Note on Warfare and ‘Masculine Aggression’

Many radical feminists additionally argue that patriarchy is the natural outcome of male aggression and drive for control or domination. In truth, violence is not and never was a uniquely male or female trait. Women partake in modern imperialist wars in all their horror, as with the American women prison guards who participated in the racially-charged sexual torture of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Centuries earlier, among the Montagnais, ‘women joined in the protracted torture of Iroquois prisoners with even more fury than the men’. [\[45\]](#) Certainly, modern warfare is generally a masculinist endeavour—but warfare did not exist among early humans:

how much sense would it have made for our Pleistocene ancestors eking out a living in the woodland and savannas of tropical Africa to fight with neighboring groups rather than just moving? Small bands of hunter-gatherers, numbering 25 or so individuals, under conditions of chronic climatic fluctuations, widely dispersed over large areas, unable to fall back on staple foods like sweet potatoes or manioc . . . would have suffered from high rates of mortality, particularly child mortality, due to starvation as well as predation and disease. Recurring population crashes and bottlenecks were likely, resulting in difficulty recruiting sufficient numbers. Far from being competitors for resources, nearby members of their own species would have been more valuable as potential sharing partners. [\[46\]](#)

Documented homicides among hunter-gatherers ‘tend to involve individuals who know each other’ and in spite of ‘abundant evidence documenting intergroup conflict over the past 10,000 to 15,000 years, there is no evidence of warfare in the Pleistocene.’ [\[47\]](#) Because patriarchal violence is systemic in most modern societies, it is often assumed to be a universal human characteristic. Pinker asserts, without any citation, that foraging societies were characterised by violence against women, including kidnapping. While ‘wife-stealing’ is a feature of warring pastoral societies, a recent comparative study of 21 existing nomadic forager societies suggests kidnapping is a negligible phenomenon among egalitarian bands. According to anthropologists Douglas P. Fry and Patrik Söderberg, whereas ‘Pinker’s assumption is that men from one group raid another group to capture women . . . nowhere in the actual data for the 21 societies are found instances of lethal raiding for trophies or coups, food caches, water holes, hunting grounds, river access, flint, obsidian, salt or ochre, or to gang rape or claim betrothed women.’ [\[48\]](#) Sometimes abduction-oriented raiding by semi-sedentary bands was encouraged by colonialism. In the seventeenth century, European incursions in North America and the disruption of existing economic life induced intensive violent warfare between indigenous societies. This, along with the introduction of new diseases, led to a cycle among the Iroquois of kidnapping men, women and children from neighbouring bands to replace lost kin; and Iroquois women played a decision-making role in staging the abductions. [\[49\]](#)

Ritualised masculinist warfare emerged after the advent of patriarchy, before which there was just ‘sporadic raiding’ if anything. Women warriors in class societies are not especially unusual though, with well-known examples including Boudicca, Joan of Arc, Grace O’Malley and Lady Triêu. Institutionalised male sexual violence accompanied, but did not determine, patriarchal warfare and class exploitation. As Nepalese Maoist and ‘communist feminist’ Hisila Yami explains it: ‘Tactically, rape is used as a weapon to send the message to rebellious women that their place belongs inside their homes, and also the message to her family and community that daughters should not be sent in rebellious movements, organisations, parties. Strategically, rape is used to bolster patriarchal values, [and] sexist ideology in order to reinforce machoism in armed forces and to feminise the enemy’. [\[50\]](#)

The further notion of masculine warfare as a ‘natural’ outcome of male physical dominance is also misleading. In early human societies, it is unlikely that tendential body strength differentiations were especially significant, and certainly labour allocations can’t be reduced to genetic fitness. In the 1930s Phyllis Kadbury, observing aboriginal societies in Australia, wrote that she had ‘seen too many women attack their husbands with a tomahawk or even their own boomerangs, to feel that they are invariably the victims of ill treatment.’ In another recorded Montagnais incident, a Christian convert attempting to enforce monogamy was chased away by his knife-wielding wife. Male violence against ‘wives’ was not impossible in early human societies, but the fact that individuals were more or less constantly immersed in the collectivity suggests this was riskier than in monogamous sedentary societies. Additionally, as women’s productive and reproductive activities were vital to the immediate survival of hunter-gatherer bands, the threat of withdrawing their labour was a likely form of female bargaining power. ^[51] Bimodal strength differences between men and women undeniably take on significance once patriarchy is developed. And, because patriarchy sustains a culture that legitimises sexist violence, sexual abuse of women (including trans women) is a constant possibility and danger, and all socialist groups must take stringent measures, ideologically and organisationally, to combat this.

II - The Invention of Sex

When feminists argue that the concept of a male and female ‘sex’ is constructed, they are not typically denying the physical biological realities of human bodies. Biology is important to any politics of liberation. Hunger is a biological (and social) need that must be met, and the struggle for bodily sexual autonomy, and comprehensive universal health care, is key to any politics of liberation. It may be fair to argue that some postmodernist academic theorists, by focusing only on language and the ‘discourses’ of medical practice, obscure these issues. By contrast, Marxist feminists, many of whom are transgender, recognise the need to secure and defend bodily rights. The TERF talking point that trans people don’t care about biological reproductive justice is a lie. The politics of pioneering transgender Communist Leslie Feinberg stressed the intertwined nature of trans liberation and sexual reproductive autonomy: ‘The heart of both is the right of each individual to make decisions about our own bodies and to define ourselves’. [\[52\]](#)

The modern concept of sex categories is, however, inextricably bound up with social meaning and political ideologies. Biological sex, in its popular (and often scientific) usage, is loaded with societal values that are assigned to aspects of human biology. As historian of western medical science Thomas Laqueur explains, ‘almost everything one wants to say about sex—however sex is understood—already has in it a claim about gender.’ [\[53\]](#) Sex is a social construct, but it nevertheless has real-life ramifications: ‘race’ is also socially constructed (by centuries of colonialism, slavery and imperialism) and yet has real, devastating, implications.

Scientific knowledge is shaped by the class character of the society that produces it. Modern science developed around the time that bourgeois theorists and politicians were replacing feudal religious morality with the secular discourse of ‘universal rights’. This language was, however, in contradiction to the real subordination and intensifying exploitation of the poor, women, non-Europeans and the disabled. There was thus required a ‘natural’ justification for having ‘universal rights’ apply only to wealthy

European men. In late-eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, scientists and medical men ‘insisted that the bodies of males and females, of whites and people of color, Jews and Gentiles, and middleclass and laboring men differed deeply. In an era that argued politically for individual rights on the basis of human equality, scientists defined some bodies as better and more deserving of rights than others.’ The ‘scientific’ construction of a sex binary really took off in the 1800s, in the context of ruling class backlash against the nascent women’s rights movement. Previously, science viewed human biology as essentially fluid, continuous and flexible: prior to the eighteenth century the prevailing Galenic ‘one-sex model’ viewed women’s reproductive organs as an ‘inversion’ of male ones. Modern biologists were however concerned to ‘discover’ an absolute scientific basis for assumed moral and intellectual differences between men and women. This entailed the medical policing of ‘hermaphrodites’ (the contemporary term for intersex people) who contradicted any simple sexual classification of men and women. There was a tendency to identify gonads (ovaries and testes) as the sole defining factor in biological ‘sex’ so that, for example, a body with two ovaries, no matter how many ‘masculine’ features it might have, was ‘female’; and a body with a pair of non-functional testes along with a vagina and breasts was ‘male’. Scientists virtually ‘classified “hermaphrodites” out of existence’. ^[54] As will be seen below, the scientific policing of intersexuality continues largely unabated today.

The Gametal Defence

Emma Hilton, a biologist and TERF, justifies her opposition to the presence of intersex women in sports by arguing that sexual dimorphism (differences in physical characteristics correlated with sexual organs) is near-universal in nature, based on the fact that what are designated as ‘female’ reproductive organs in some fauna and flora ‘makes large [i.e. egg-producing, as opposed to sperm-producing] gametes’. This exceedingly abstract line of argument shows just how far sex essentialists are being forced to retreat in the face of an inability to clearly assign ‘sex’ to chromosomes, hormones, brains or other biological features. Hilton asserts with sincerity: [‘From Humans to Asparagus, Females are Females’](#). Paul Cockshott, a transphobic Marxist

who also rants about the ‘gay lobby’, declares: ‘We know that humans are placentals mammals and that all such are characterised by sexual reproduction with two sexes, internal fertilisation, and lactation in females. In all placentals the same basic genetic sex determination process occurs.’ ^[55] In a similar vein to Cockshott, the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist-Leninist) argues: ‘biological differentiation between male and female is a real thing. It doesn’t just exist in humanity, it exists in many species throughout the natural world. Sexual reproduction is a natural biological process that has persisted in nature due to the diversity it engenders; it is a phenomenon encountered in the natural world.’ ^[56] What is true, is that in many organisms reproduction involves two different reproductive organs:

In biology, sex means producing offspring by mixing the genes from two parents—a cooperative act. Many species reproduce without sex: by budding, by fragmentation, or with eggs that do not need fertilization. . . . In any case, sex is not synonymous with reproduction but is one means of reproduction. In biology, male function and female function are unproblematically defined in terms of gamete size. Nearly all sexually reproducing species have gametes of two sizes, one big, the other tiny. By *definition*, male function means making small gametes, and female function large gametes. By *definition*, the small gamete is a ‘sperm,’ and the large gamete is an ‘egg.’ That’s it. ^[57]

But sex essentialists unproblematically move from tendential gametal reproduction in placental mammals, including humans, to ‘sex’ with all its ideological, gendered baggage. TERFs (and transphobes in general) make a *particular* biological *bimodality*—sexual dimorphism—into an *essential* biological *binary*, and make this artificially-universalised binary into biological and social-historical destiny. Thus, the [CPGB\(ML\)](#) pontificates: ‘Are “sex” and “gender” synonyms? Well they are synonyms, but a certain group of academics in the seventies in the United States decided that they weren’t synonyms.’ For the CPGB(ML), the complexities of sex and gender are reduced *ad absurdum* to the question ‘Why can’t a circle self-identify as a square?’.

Gametal reproduction itself does not in any way imply the popular or 'common sense' understanding of a sex binary. Firstly, sexual dimorphism 'varies so profoundly across species that sex ("maleness" and "femaleness") carries minimal explanatory value . . . Consider, for example, the diverse explanations of sex differences and reproductive roles specific to honeybees, mallard ducks, and humans.' Secondly, in many species organisms do not easily classify into male or female because they make both eggs and sperm at the same time or at different times during their lives; and thirdly, the 'gametic binary does not define a corresponding binary in body morphology [shape/structure] or behavior. It is a mistake to classify organisms as either male or female, as though whole individuals were unproblematically binary, just as the gametes are.' ^[58] But sex is a scientific concept enmeshed in a matrix of gendered meanings applied to various biological features. Hardly anyone talking about biological sex is referring only to gametes.

Sex is so ideologically loaded, and the notion of a simple binary so irresistible, that scientists even ascribe sex to single-celled bacteria. In the 1940s-60s scientists scrambled to identify single-cells as sexually active and 'promiscuous': even in contemporary genetics textbooks, unidirectional transfers of genes are described in the language of the sex binary, demonstrating 'the pervasiveness of cultural influences and assumptions in the construction and definition of even neuter [non-sexually reproductive] scientific subjects.' ^[59] And of course, class societies obsessively assign gender or sex to objects in the non-organic world. For defenders of the sex binary concept, the problem is this:

How many properties involved in reproduction (attributes of chromosomes, hormone levels, eggs/sperm, uterus, genitals) can be omitted without losing membership in a particular reproductive role (and shift to the other, or to none)? Does it matter what prevents a person from performing a certain reproductive role (whether a person has no uterus because of a hysterectomy, has complete androgen insensitivity syndrome, or has the Y-chromosome)? If we focus on the outcomes of reproduction instead, it is too simplistic to reduce all that is relevant for reproduction to sperm, egg, and uterus. Successful reproduction involves a wider range of things, such as providing food, care, and stimuli, things that do not require particular

biological (chromosomal, and so on) properties on the part of the provider.
[\[60\]](#)

If many anatomical properties and neurological traits commonly used in ideological sex-categorisation are not reliably correlated with reproductive roles/gametes, then why has sex-categorisation persisted? Over a century ago, [Engels](#) observed of the field of biology that ‘the need for a systematic presentation of interconnections makes it necessary again and again to surround the final and ultimate truths with a luxuriant growth of hypotheses’, and that, with regularity, new advances ‘compel us to revise completely all formerly established final and ultimate truths in the realm of biology, and to put whole piles of them on the scrap-heap once and for all.’ The science of sex difference has however thus far persisted in a similar manner to race science. For two centuries, race scientists have attempted to establish a biological basis for white superiority and non-white inferiority. As each attempt to do so was discredited, due to selective or biased presentation of results, or misinterpretation of findings, it was ‘replaced a few years later by another research program looking for racial differences in new physical substrates, with new technologies, and with a new set of terminology. The history of attempts to establish the biological essence of sex difference and the physical and mental inferiority of women follows a similar trajectory. Each time a new research program emerges, the claim is made that at last the difference between the sexes can be located, measured, and quantified, and that the differences between the sexes are greater than ever previously imagined.’ [\[61\]](#)

Aberrant Allosomes and Haphazard Hormones

Allosomes, commonly called ‘sex chromosomes’, are DNA structures in cells which carry genetic material. Human women typically but not always carry an XX and men an XY chromosome complement. Sex chromosomes were discovered around 1900, in the early days of genetics, and were seen as all-powerful determinants of sexual characteristics. Many scientists however rejected the ascription of ‘sex’ to allosomes from the start. Leading embryologist Thomas Hunt Morgan attacked the early notion of

sex chromosomes for inventing without reliable evidence 'a special element that has the power of turning maleness into femaleness'. ^[62] Significantly however, some early women's rights activists seized on the concept to support an idea of women as fundamentally biologically distinct from men, but innately superior in specific ways—a typical modern TERF viewpoint, as in the suggestion of [Mary Daly](#) that childrearing capacity amounts to a unique fusion of body and mind, a 'native talent' inherently lacking in those who cannot birth offspring. In 1977 [Andrea Dworkin](#) outlined the danger of this womb-supremacist ideology, which 'signifies a basic conformity to the tenets of biological determinism that underpin the [patriarchal] social system . . . unable to abandon by will or impulse a lifelong and centuries-old commitment to childbearing as the female creative act, women have increasingly tried to transform the very ideology that has enslaved us.'

Genitals and allosomes are the most binary of sex-associated traits, yet many people with XY chromosomes have 'female' genitals, and vice versa. And sometimes, an egg or sperm may lack a sex chromosome or have an extra one, creating an embryo with say an XXY, XYY or XO complement. For a long time, it was wrongly believed sex chromosomes determined all other sexual characteristics. The last gasp of the sex chromosome theory was the discovery in the 1990s of the SRY gene on the Y chromosome, without which the development of male gonads is impossible. But since the new millennium, the SRY gene is recognised as one of many sex-determining genetic factors. New technologies in DNA sequencing and cell biology show that most humans are '[a patchwork of genetically distinct cells](#), some with a sex that might not match that of the rest of their body'. Hence why occasionally a person with XY chromosomes develops typically female characteristics, and why alterations in hormone signalling can cause XX individuals to develop along typically male lines. The concept of 'sex hormones', the third sex essence relied upon by transphobes, is even more dubious.

Hormones are chemicals that transmit signals creating changes in cells and tissues. Steroid hormones secreted from gonads, including oestrogen and testosterone, are popularly viewed as sex-specific, but in reality they play multiple roles and are present in varying quantities in all human bodies. Men need oestrogen for normal development, from bone growth to fertility,

and testosterone is important for women: testosterone supplements are for instance often used to treat symptoms of oestrogen deficiency in women. The scientific concept of hormones again emerged in the early-twentieth century, when new debates were opening up over the rights of women and homosexuals in Europe and the US. Some scientists believed manipulation of steroid hormones could ‘permit the correction of modernity’s gender deviants—feminist spinsters, homosexuals, impotent males, and frigid wives.’ ^[63] This was just one instance of ‘the appropriation of prescientific ideologies within modern scientific practice’. ^[64]

Hormones associated with reproduction are also plastic/flexible in both men and women. Hormonal changes in pregnant women is a well-known phenomenon, but levels of hormones associated with ‘maternal sensitivity’, including prolactin and cortisol, also rise in ‘biological men’ in intimate association with pregnant women or new babies. ^[65] Findings published in 2009 from a comparison of neighbouring cultural groups in Tanzania also ‘found lower testosterone levels among fathers from the population in which paternal care was the cultural norm compared with fathers from the group in which paternal care was typically absent.’ ^[66] More generally, hormonal systems ‘respond exquisitely to experience, be it in form of nutrition, stress, or sexual activity (to name but a few possibilities).’ ^[67] Most damagingly, sex essentialists frequently assert that ‘sex hormones’ are determinants of stereotypically gendered dispositions, i.e. oestrogen causing empathetic/cooperative/nurturing behaviour, and testosterone inciting a rationalistic/competitive/aggressive temperament; ignoring questions of socio-cultural conditioning, and mistaking correlation for causation. To make this point clear, consider that the social assignment of gendered meaning to hormones in itself causes gendered behavioural differences: the common belief that testosterone fuels a high (heterosexual) sex drive ‘can actually become reality through the process of interpreting what hormones do . . . social expectations about gender can actually function as self-fulfilling prophecies’. ^[68] The long-standing market in peddling variously-processed bull testicles as an aphrodisiac is testament to this.

Hormones have become a major site of the transphobic offensive. For instance, in the moral panic surrounding ‘hormone blockers’, which are prescribed to stop the development of certain typically male or female

features. Given that, as argued above, medical practice under capitalism is inextricable from gendered and patriarchal ideologies, it might be contended that biological interventions can only reinforce the sex/gender binary. TERFs certainly argue this with crusading zeal, but it is a complex problematic, which I address in section III. For now, it's worth noting the common misconception that confuses blockers with irreversible 'cross-sex hormones'. Blockers have in fact been used on children for decades, mostly to deal with difficulties associated with early puberty. British TERFs have jumped on a trial group begun in 2011 that reduced the age at which the Gender Identity Development Service (GIDS) prescribed puberty blockers to treat 'gender dysphoria' from 16 to 12. In March 2019, the anti-trans lobby group Transgender Trend (see section IV) published a critical report on the study, which was subsequently taken up by BBC's Newsnight. Nominally 'socialist' newspaper *Morning Star* ran an [alarmist article](#) on the trial study by Transgender Trend founder Stephanie Davies-Arai, reporting a 'significant increase in the rate of children experiencing thoughts of self-harm and suicide'. Some young people did report Self Harm (SH) ideation and acts, but it is speculation to relate this to the blockers: in general among teenagers, rates of SH 'increase dramatically between 12 and 15 years, and gender dysphoric young people have particularly high rates of SH. while 4 young people showed an increased propensity to SH over time, 3 decreased.' *Morning Star* also criticised the absence of control groups, but 'by definition there was no control group', because a randomised trial involving young people who don't want to take puberty blockers is impossible. Transphobes further jumped on a researcher who said the interim results were positive, yet 'all the young people involved in study wished to continue puberty blockers.' ^[69]

Sensationalism surrounding hormones has also been seen in relation to sports, with the recent press attacks on trans and intersex competitors. 'Sex testing' in sports has always been heavily ideological. In 1968, the International Olympic Committee instituted 'scientific' sex testing in a climate of media-fuelled fears that competitors from socialist countries were trying to cheat by having men masquerade as women. Since the 1990s, and escalating in the last few years, elite women athletes with elevated testosterone levels have been intensely scrutinised, and it is often wrongly assumed that testosterone universally confers a performance

advantage. The International Association of Athletics Federations' own analysis of testosterone and performance, involving over 1,100 women competing in track and field events, 'shows that [for three of the 11 running events, women with lower testosterone actually did better](#) than those with higher levels.' Yet new IAAF (now rebranded World Athletics) regulations are being implemented in races where there is no evidence of performance advantage caused by higher testosterone. To lower their normal testosterone levels to new arbitrary levels, many women 'will be forced to take stronger drugs, and endure chronic, significant side effects.' TERFs don't seem to care about the potential damage to these women's physical bodies. A [UN Humans Rights Council resolution](#) in early 2019 accused the IAAF of violating "international human rights norms and standards".

'Sex testing' does not target men's sports even though, for instance, 'men with the intersex variation Diplo, a.k.a. XYY, produce higher levels of testosterone than other men and could also be said to have an "unfair physical advantage" over their peers.' ^[20] The media circus around athletes' hormone levels ultimately demonstrates patriarchal society's obsession with policing the boundaries of womanhood, which TERFs are currently complicit in. Those athletes viewed as unambiguously male are not challenged for any unusual testosterone production. The only bodies that are attacked are in women's sporting categories, while [abnormal male bodies](#) (encompassing all male world-champion athletes) are celebrated.

Olympian swimmer and gold medalist Michael Phelps is genetically endowed with a proportionally longer wingspan, larger than average hands and feet and a double-jointed chest [hypermobility syndrome]. These seemingly arbitrary differences are all advantages for Phelps in the sport of swimming, helping him get ahead with each stroke that he takes. Beyond his heap of anatomical advantages, Phelps also produces half the amount of lactic acid—an acid produced in muscle tissue that is responsible for fatigue—as his fellow competitors.

Phelps' genetic sporting advantages are far greater than any abnormal testosterone levels. It is true that large performance discrepancies between male and female categories exist in most sports. Emma Hilton has suggested there are 9000 males between 100m world-record holders Usain

Bolt and Florence Griffith Joyner (though it's not clear where this figure came from, and Hilton doesn't note the fact that [far less women participate in sports than men](#)). The discrepancies are large enough to not be solely accounted for by the fact men still numerically dominate most sports, and get the most institutional support (funding, training expertise and facilities, cultural encouragement etc.). Hilton's statistic might have kickstarted an interesting and nuanced conversation, but it doesn't because Hilton calls for unproblematic ['sex segregation'](#) and anti-trans discrimination based on, as seen above, her simple gametal test that effortlessly divides both humans and asparagus into males and females. TERFs like Hilton ignore the inescapable problem that ['no single test, biological or otherwise, can supplant a holistic picture'](#), which includes an athlete's lived social gender identity, in determining eligibility to compete' in men's or women's category events. Real grounds do exist for a meaningful conversation confronting issues of 'natural' ability in sports, a conversation that would necessarily question what it is, as societies, that we are valuing in contests of physical performance pre-eminences. But TERFs throw all social and political nuance or inquiry out the window. And, as will be seen below, in the case of the intense media scrutiny and TERF vilification of 800m world champion Caster Semenya, gendered racism (or 'misogynoir') is heavily at play.

Sex Essentialism and Intersexphobia

Aside from trans people, the other immediate victims of sex essentialism are intersex people. Class societies often view intersex people as subversives, because they challenge the ideology of a natural, rigid male-female binary. With the advent of class relations and hierarchies, explored back in section I, social codes were needed to maintain elites' authority over productive surpluses. According to Bloodworth, initially the sexuality of women in the ruling classes became subject to new controls in order to ensure the patrilineal inheritance of property by their class. Over time, creeping binaristic male-female segregation was dispersed down into all social classes, along with new ideas about women's 'natural' inferiority. Thus, some early class societies developed extensive regulations for people with abnormal sexual traits, in order to maintain the overarching ideological

gender system. The Jewish Tosefta for instance forbade ‘hermaphrodites’ from inheriting their fathers’ estates (like daughters), from secluding themselves with women (like sons), and from shaving (like men). ^[71]

In our modern-day era, intersexuality is considered a disorder to be immediately corrected at birth. Physicians who directly manage intersexuality act out of, and perpetuate, ‘common sense’ beliefs about male and female sexuality and gender roles. Transphobic 'leftist' [Jonah Mix](#)’s declaration that 'fewer than one in one thousand births require a specialist to assign sex' has a different meaning to what he thinks. Doctors may arbitrarily choose to remove a small penis at birth and create a girl child, even though that penis may have grown to 'normal' size during puberty. Similarly, doctors may use only their personal impressions to decide that a baby’s clitoris is 'too big' to belong to a girl and must be downsized, ‘even in cases where the child is not intersexual by any definition.’ Due to this ad hoc approach, intersex babies are often subjected to multiple surgical operations, which can lead to dense scarring, and cause inability to orgasm. ^[72] Trans and intersex liberationist [Jules Gleeson](#) highlights the British case of Martin Hasani, who was born with hypospadias, where the urethral opening develops somewhere other than the tip of the penis, causing minor effects on day-to-day living. Hasani was subjected to a total of 11 surgeries between the age of three months and 17 years old, as well as sexually abusive behaviour by the surgeon. This is not an isolated case, suggesting that standard genitals-focused invasive practices on intersex babies and children legitimise sexual abuse. As biologist and historian Anne Fausto-Sterling points out, western societies ‘protest the practices of genital mutilation in other cultures, but tolerate them at home.’ ^[73]

TERFs reinforce the sex essentialist perspective that views intersex conditions as mistakes of nature masking the person’s 'real' sex. One intersex activist, [Cary Gabriel Costello](#), recalls being told by TERFs that doctors should examine intersex infants and ‘assign them to the correct binary sex based on capacity to reproduce in the “very rare” situations in which that would be possible without surgery, and otherwise on genes.’ In this scenario, people with complete androgen insensitivity syndrome (CAIS), born with typical vulvae and developing ‘female’ body characteristics at puberty, would be understood as permanently and

'naturally' male, being infertile and having XY chromosomes. CAIS is often undiagnosed until late childhood or puberty so, according to TERF logic, CAIS teens would be forced to undergo traumatic 'sex' conversion therapy. Intersexphobic sentiments or attitudes that marginalise the struggle for intersex rights have been expressed by a number of TERFs in Britain, including [Germaine Greer](#), who claims 'it is simply not true that intersexual [sic] people suffer in a way that other people don't suffer', as well as [Julie Bindel](#) and [Sarah Ditum](#).

Additionally, while intersex advocates emphasise choice in bodily alterations, TERFs hold that *all* sex-related bodily interventions are mutilations. As Costello explains, in the TERF worldview, sex is stable: 'Chromosomes can't be altered. A vaginoplasty cannot produce a real vagina, nor a phalloplasty a real penis, they say . . . For intersex people, this just replaces the rigid regime of forcing medical interventions with a rigid regime of withholding them.' This position is promoted by the [CPGB\(ML\)](#): 'Transgender activists want us, for instance, to encourage little boys and little girls who prefer the lifestyle that society offers to people of the opposite sex to the one that accords to their own sex to actually physically mutilate themselves'. Leaving aside the fact that no one is suggesting trans kids should be encouraged to desire surgery, this rhetoric is a gross appropriation of legitimate concerns surrounding genital mutilation, which deliberately obscures the vital distinction between forced or coerced and desired bodily alteration for the sole purpose of trans bashing. Intersex advocates themselves like Costello hold that 'no intervention should be forced—but also that once an intersex person is old enough to give full informed consent, that hormonal, surgical, or others interventions should be performed if that's what the individual truly wants'.

Unsurprisingly then, trans and intersex people have shared basic rights-based interests. For instance, while many intersex people accept the 'sex' they were medically assigned at birth, many do not. TERFs recently lobbied the Scottish Parliament to block reforms to the rigid biomedical model of sex segregation, and they are also trying to prevent these reforms getting through the Westminster government. Gleeson explains the current difficulties of the British gender reassignment process: 'I found the easiest route to gender correction through the same bureaucratic slog required by

other (non-intersex) trans people. This involved convincing multiple medical professionals that longstanding gender dysphoria was likely to be permanent, completing a deed poll, and receiving a letter confirming my name change from my employer. This hassle would be considerably streamlined by the proposed reforms to the [Gender Recognition Act]'. TERF ideology hurts intersex people in other ways, as outlined by [Gleeson](#): 'it's quite common for an intersex woman to grow facial hair, to have a relatively large frame, not to develop breasts, or to have facial features read as "masculine". An atmosphere of suspicion and second-guessing in women-only spaces is, as such, directly opposed to our interests (and likely at a time when we are most in need of support and affirmation: for instance when accessing a rape crisis centre, or domestic abuse shelter).' Similarly, Costello emphasises that in 'painting trans women's bodies as deceptive, dangerous and disgusting, transphobic feminists paint those born sex variant with the same brush.' TERFs' core belief that gender identity is a pathological delusion, masking 'real' biological sex, is fundamentally unstable even within the terms of their own worldview. It is now time to properly address the relationship between biology and gender identity from a reasoned and internally consistent materialist perspective.

III - Marxism, Identity and Human Nature

Materialism, in the philosophical sense, means grounded in the laws of nature; that reality is independent of human consciousness, and indeed that the latter forms part of and cannot escape from natural laws (there is no 'free' spirit or soul etc.). This position by no means implies biological determinism or essentialism, a form of *mechanical materialism*, as opposed to Marxist *dialectical* materialism. Mechanical materialism is the trap that transphobic 'Marxists' have fallen into. Transphobes often adopt materialist rhetoric, for example the transphobic US Women's Liberation Front ([WoLF](#)) states that 'Sex is grounded in materiality, whereas "gender identity" is simply an ideology that has no grounding in science'. The CPGB(ML) likewise presents itself as a paragon of materialism against the supposed 'idealism' of trans people. We have already seen how the notion of a sex binary has more to do with patriarchal ideology than the intricate reality of human genetic makeup. But materialism is not limited to the biological realm, nor are the biological and social cut off from each other. Real human physiological life, including subjective identity formation within brain structures, never exists in a pre-social, i.e. purely biological, form. As Marxist biologists Steven Rose, Richard Lewontin and Leon Kamin explain: 'The relation between organism and environment is not simply one of interaction of internal and external factors, but a dialectical development of organism and milieu in response to each other . . . All human phenomena are simultaneously social and biological'. [\[74\]](#)

Biology and Dialectical Materialism

As [Engels](#) recognised, thus far in human history it has been 'inherent in the descent of man from the animal world that he can never entirely rid himself of the beast'. Engels however also outlined what was for his time a truly

[revolutionary challenge to biological essentialism](#), emphasising the role of social processes (labour) in human evolution:

the sense of touch . . . has been developed only side by side with the development of the human hand itself, through the medium of labour. The reaction on labour and speech of the development of the brain and its attendant senses, of the increasing clarity of consciousness, power of abstraction and of conclusion, gave both labour and speech an ever-renewed impulse to further development . . . the more this progresses the more will men not only feel but also know their oneness with nature, and the more impossible will become the senseless and unnatural idea of a contrast between mind and matter, man and nature, soul and body

[Elsewhere](#), Engels remarked that ‘man himself is a product of nature, which has developed in and along with its environment; hence it is self-evident that the products of the human brain, being in the last analysis also products of nature, do not contradict the rest of nature's interconnections but are in correspondence with them.’ There is not, and never has been, such a thing in practice as a ‘purely biological’ (pre-social) human, yet nor does human consciousness exist outside of physiological laws and structures. The celebrated evolutionary biologist [Stephen Jay Gould](#), while not explicitly a Marxist, drew on Engels’ dialectical materialism to explain the deficiency of both biological essentialism and postmodern culturalist perspectives that totally dismiss the relevance of biology:

A proper understanding of biology and culture both affirms the great importance of biology in human behaviour and also explains why biology makes us free. The old equation of biology with restriction, with the inherent (as opposed to malleable) side of the false dichotomy between nature and nurture rests upon errors of thinking as old as Western culture itself. The critics of biological determinism do not uphold the equally fallacious (and equally cruel and restrictive) view that human culture cancels biology. Biological determinism has limited the lives of millions by misidentifying their socioeconomic disadvantages as inborn deficiencies, but cultural determinism can be just as cruel in attributing severe congenital disease, autism for example, to psychobabble about too much parental love, or too little.

In specific relation to sex, purposeful stretching or surpassing of organic bodily limits is not restricted to surgical alteration. Humans have always used tools as an extension of our given biology, and our capacity to do so continually increases in line with societal development. Today, ‘a breastfeeding device, a simple tool consisting of a milk bottle connected to a tube that can be attached to a nipple, allows one to breastfeed regardless of whether the person is lactating. In this case, the person is actively constructing a capacity to feed a baby independent of the physiological properties of the body that would, under common classification strategies, justify categorizing that person as a male or female . . . A dildo can also be incorporated in a way that extends one’s sex. Extending sex is not about either constructing female/male individuals, or female/male properties, but about transforming one’s relation to the world by enhancing one’s capacities for particular actions.’ ^[75] Here we can paraphrase Marx on the transformative nature of humans: ‘Labour is, first of all, a process between (wo)man and nature . . . Through this movement (s)he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way (s)he *simultaneously changes her own nature*.’

Born This Way? If Not So What?

For sex essentialists, humans are either born a man or a woman. When some liberals preach ‘tolerance’ of trans people, they do so on the assumption that a trans person’s gender identity is a ‘natural deviation’ from a biological norm; that they were born with the ‘wrong brain’ (or wrong body) and cannot help this. Here there are direct parallels with early liberal homosexual rights advocates, such as Havelock Ellis and Edward Carpenter, who viewed homosexuality as an innate ‘natural’ biological abnormality. This perspective, which all but erases non-binary gender people, [still holds much currency](#):

The claims to be “born this way” benefited the fight against homophobia within the existing narrative . . . Arguing that gay people can’t help being gay, and reinforcing this with the claim that it is strictly nature, not nurture, is a simpler step towards tolerance than trying to remove the negative associations with homosexuality. If being gay and trans are afflictions that

can't be helped, then it's easier to argue that society has a responsibility to accommodate us. Of course without the existence of homophobia, choosing to be gay wouldn't be a problem. It's only in such a homophobic society that we so strongly associate the claim that it's a choice with the view that it's the wrong choice. Similarly arguing that trans people are born trans appears to be a more manageable path to acceptance, at the cost of supporting gender essentialist ideas.

How individual trans people experience and perceive their own identity is none of my business. Most cisgender people believe they are born with their own internal gender and sexuality identities, so it's no surprise many trans people also do. Here I am only insisting that trans people do not have to argue they were born with their gender identity. According to [Julia Serano](#), not all trans people fit the 'canonical' story of feeling they were the 'other gender' since infancy:

Some people don't experience gender dysphoria and/or a desire to be the other gender until significantly later in their lives. Some happily live as members of a non-transsexual [sic] identity (e.g., crossdresser, genderqueer, gay or lesbian) for many years before coming to the understanding that they might be happier if they transition [socially, physically or both]. . . . Finally, just as trans individuals' identities and personal understandings of gender may shift over time prior to transitioning, they may do so afterwards as well. I know people who followed the canonical transsexual pathway to initially become trans men or trans women, but over time found they were happier identifying as genderqueer and/or presenting more androgynously. A relatively small fraction (less than 4 percent, perhaps even smaller, according to most studies) ultimately decide to detransition—that is, return to living as a member of their birth-assigned gender.

Gender identity, like sexuality, is neither biologically 'innate' nor fixed. Among historians aware of the enormous variety in gender and sexuality expression across human cultures, this has long been obvious. But now science too is catching up. For the past several decades, scientists have accepted the notion of brain plasticity (the brain's capacity to change in response to environmental experience). Neuroplasticity has considerable ramifications for explanations of gender identity. From an early stage,

human infants are exceptional at developing recognition of complex schemas, e.g. being able to identify various animals in different picture books based on minimalistic illustrations. By age 16-18 months, they develop symbolic thought, meaning the ability 'to imitate an object that is not physically present and to refer to an object in a way that is not defined by its physical features'. Also during infancy, formative social interactions occur. As such, Fausto-Sterling reasonably hypothesises that initial interpersonal interactions 'produce spectra of gendered behaviors and internalized subjective feelings and inclinations as symbolic understandings of the world that emerge as a subjective sense of self in years two and three of development.' [76]

In a recent study, Beverly Fagot and her colleagues analysed the formation of gender conceptualisation in children ranging from 1.75 to 3.25 years old. They gave the children a 'gender task'—to correctly classify pictures of adults and children as 'mommy', 'daddy', 'boy', or 'girl'. The younger children (averaging two years old) couldn't pass the test as they had no working concept of gender. The older children, averaging ~2.5 years old, correctly classified both adults and children. Significantly, the children who developed boy-girl labels behaved differently. They preferred same-gender play groups, and girls were less aggressive. Fagot and co. also found that 'parents of future early [gender] labelers gave more positive and negative responses to sex-typed toy play' and that, by 2.25 years, the 'early labelers showed more traditional sex-typed behavior than late labelers.' [77]

From infancy gender is implicated in formative experiences. A very young child is not skilled physiologically, motorically or cognitively: therefore, gender identities and physical and neurological abilities develop simultaneously. To take one example, grasping skills 'develop together within an enveloping context of sports signifiers. The [typical western male] child is offered a ball at three, six, nine, and 12 months and beyond, receives specific instruction in how to throw a ball and copious praise and gender/sex labeled reinforcement ("What a big boy! What a great throw!") for any interest shown from birth onward.' The specific gender skill of ball play, including ability and desire, represents culture grafted onto and informing the development of biology. [78] Parents further apply gendered meaning to early infant reactions—for instance, a study of adults watching

a baby playing with a jack-in-the-box found that when parents believe the baby is a girl, they describe 'her' as 'afraid'; when they believe it is a boy, they see 'him' as 'angry'. This in turn will shape how children perceive and perform their own reflexive behaviours. ^[79]

Transphobic Marxist [Paul Cockshott](#) baselessly asserts that the ability to identify 'sex' precedes language, and that it would be 'rash' to suggest 'having children play naked with short hair would blind the children to the sex of their playmates.' In fact, studies have been undertaken precisely to test whether children can identify sex based solely on anatomy. Children develop understanding of gendered social cues (e.g. hair length or clothing) before they develop an association of gender (or 'sex') with biological features. Psychologist Sandra Bem showed 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds photographs of either a naked boy or a naked girl and then of the same child dressed either in girls' or boys' clothing. The children had difficulty labelling the naked children 'boy' or 'girl', but successfully used social clues—clothes and hairstyles—to classify the dressed ones. About 40 percent of the 3-, 4- and 5-year-old children could accurately identify sex in all of the photos because they had absorbed social concepts of genitalia. The rest had not yet acquired social notions of sex constancy. It is only after children internalise social concepts of gender and sex that they show strong gender-typed toy and peer preferences and knowledge about gender differences in toys and clothing. ^[80] Recent [studies](#) suggesting that trans children's brains more closely match those of cisgender members of the gender they identify with may well be correct, but if so should be interpreted as evidence of identity-related neurological structures being shaped by early cultural and interpersonal experiences.

There is also a high degree of fluidity and flexibility in identity formation over time. Fausto-Sterling suggests that if one or more of the neurological 'subsystems' that stabilise a subjective gender conceptualisation change with time (due to environmental experiences), 'a currently stable state can destabilize and reform in a new and different assembly.' ^[81] This is supported by the fact that there is 'an additional twofold increase in myelinization [accelerated information-transmitting nerve impulse activity in the brain] between the first and second decades of life, and an additional 60 percent between the fourth and sixth decades, making plausible the idea

that the body can incorporate gender-related experiences throughout life.’ ^[82] [Shon Faye](#) is right to argue that ‘our brains learn to develop certain patterns of function in line with the gendered expectations and norms of the world around us. In other words: the biological basis of identity and selfhood is as complicated and rich as the diversity of every human being who walks this planet. Who knew?’ Faye further points out that reliance on the ‘born this way’ narrative amounts to ‘an intimidated negotiation with the oppressor’, rather than a sustainable means of liberation.

Femininity -In-Itself and -For-Itself

TERFs suggest that trans women either play into sexist stereotypes, or can only mimic authentic/essential womanhood. [Cockshott](#) states that transgender women (he doesn’t call them this) ‘adopt signs of identity in the form of dress, makeup and engage in explicit declaration just as the credit card fraudster adopts signs and makes declarations of a stolen identity.’ [Greer](#) invents a bizarre pop-psychology formulation, writing: ‘gender reassignment is an exorcism of the mother. When a man decides to spend his life impersonating his mother (like Norman Bates in Psycho) it is as if he murders her and gets away with it, proving at a stroke that there was nothing to her’. A more extreme version of this narrative is that trans women’s identity is a ‘rape’ of womanhood—an abhorrent trivialisation of the real sexual violence systemically meted out to both cis and trans women.

TERFs argue that trans women perpetuate patriarchy by adopting stereotypically feminine attires. The obvious counterpoint has been made that trans women ‘are no more responsible for people like Caitlyn Jenner appearing on magazine covers than cis women are for Kim Kardashian.’ ^[83] More pertinently, middle-class TERF media pundits have been allowed to dominate the national conversation and thus create a fictional narrative of the trans experience (while the working-class trans majority has been completely erased from popular discourses). Faye writes: ‘I am often surprised and infuriated by accusations that because I am a trans woman I am the proponent of an ideology or agenda that believes in “pink and blue

brains”, or in an innate gender identity that stands independent of society and culture. I believe no such thing, and share with fellow feminists a refusal to entertain the dangerous idea that the oppression of women and queer people has a natural basis’. Another trans activist, [Cristan Williams](#), rhetorically asks of TERFs: ‘Tell me, how many billions do non-trans women spend on “synthetic hormone consumption”? How many billions do non-trans women spend on “plastic surgery”? How much money do YOU spend on sexed diets, exercise, scents, hairstyles, etc? In light of this, are you really going to attempt to construct an *ad naturam* argument for body shapes?’ Cis people constantly enact social practices that ‘actively mask deviations from the paradigmatic, idealized cases (by waxing, wearing specific clothes, and more radically, by surgical interventions [either coerced/forced or desired] on ambiguous genitalia). A lot of work goes into maintaining the appearance of absolute sexual dimorphism, despite all the evidence to the contrary.’ ^[84] Trans women themselves are in reality often very gender non-conforming in attire (vis-à-vis social expectations surrounding their subjective gender identity). The second irony is that TERFs, in mocking trans women, frequently adopt anti-woman rhetoric, not just reducing women to reproductive organs, but also using sexist language about body hair etc. The CPGB(ML) leans on misogynistic tropes to dismiss dissenters against its transphobia within its ranks, describing them as ‘very emotional’.

It is inescapable that ‘transgender’ as a modern medicalised classificatory concept exists within the oppressive logic of capitalism. As such, Micha Cárdenas has argued that the ‘transnational circulation of the idea of transgender is a colonial operation, spreading Western ontologies and logics such as Western medicine; the idea of the individual, unchanging self; and the binary gender system.’ ^[85] Indeed, within the western context, even the dominant representation of non-binary gender identity has cohered to Eurocentric ideals, under the influence of the [beauty industry’s portrayal of white, thin androgyny](#). Gender non-conformity by Black people and other people of colour is subjected to heightened social scrutiny, for the open defiance of colonialist constructions of masculinity and femininity that they can never in any case qualify for. This is an important appraisal for the western LGBTI+ movement to internalise, but it doesn’t mean trans identity

is itself colonialist, only that western sex and gender ideologies should not be imposed on non-western ones.

TERFs, however, present a false dichotomy, exemplified in a *Morning Star* [article](#) by Jennifer Duncan: ‘The strong identification with characteristics they are taught don’t belong to them leads [trans people] to conclude they must have a “boy’s brain in a girl’s body” or vice versa . . . Some people are deeply uncomfortable with the role they are given, and there are two major ways of dealing with this discomfort — one way is collectively working to change society so that these roles will be abolished, and the other way is changing the self in order to better survive the system that is in place.’ Duncan, a self-professed feminist, is here using the very same ‘wait for the revolution’ line that has for decades been used to silence women’s particular interests within the socialist movement. Influential second-wave feminist [Monique Wittig](#) called for the destruction of the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’, but she nevertheless accepted her still-gendered lesbian identity as she held it ‘provides *for the moment* the only social form in which we [lesbians] can live freely.’ The same standard applies to trans people, many of whom are committed to feminist and revolutionary politics. Survival and struggle have always been two intertwined facets of the socialist movement. Frankly, even on an individual basis, trans people are more socially subversive than the average cisgender straight feminist. Take for instance the disruptive appropriation of the patriarchal concept of ‘family’ by LGBTI+ people and communities. It is very telling that [parenting topics are one of the major correlates of online transphobia](#) (e.g. posts beginning ‘as a mother of two kids. . .’), highlighting the unsurprising link between anti-LGBTI+ attitudes and the patriarchal desire, even if unconscious, to uphold the ‘heteronormative’ nuclear family system.

Both trans and cis women suffer from the [double-bind of sexism](#): ‘We [women] are punished for stepping outside of our allocated role, but also punished for conforming to it. If women conform to societies expectations of what a woman should be like we are considered to have invited the misogyny, yet we provoke anger when we dare to exhibit qualities considered masculine.’ Marxist-feminist [Sally Campbell](#) notes the superficiality of the TERF argument that trans women have ‘not always lived as a woman’ and thus cannot suffer misogyny: ‘a trans person will

face the misery of being constantly misgendered until they transition, at which point they will either pass as their desired gender and, if they're a woman, face the oppression that entails, or they will be identified as trans and face . . . even more virulent oppression.' Here it's worth quoting at length from '[Anarchasteminist](#)' on the oppressive class context of 'passing':

Since passing as cis takes the form, in part, of being able to perform conventional cis norms, which are themselves heavily classed (and racialised), a trans person's ability to do so will be mediated by their class status. I.e. the wealthier a person is, the more likely they are to be able to afford to take additional, elective steps (extensive hair removal, specialised clothing to hide or accentuate particular gendered body traits, etc.) to increase their chance of passing as cis. . . . Similarly, since transphobia often takes the form of institutional and economic discrimination and/or family and community rejection, an individual trans person's financial security becomes their ability to cope with isolation financially and to remove themselves from harmful situations (e.g. a neighbourhood in which they are frequently harassed or a family home in which they are rejected or abused) is key to their ability to survive and thrive in a transphobic society.

Trans women, then, face a specific form of sexism—[transmisogyny](#): 'We feel our bodies outweigh our chosen identities when we interact with others and do not pass. . . . We experience the implicit violence in gendered division of labor every time we are raped and beaten and condescended to and treated as a hot she-male sex toy.' As [Aaron Jaffe](#) explains, trans women's bodies are 'judged in light of their shape and age, capable of causing desire in lovers and aggressors, have complex relations of pain, tension, and anxiety due to bleeding (or not bleeding), assessed for fertility, monitored for size, can be sexually entered, photographed, filmed, and finally, can cause shame, happiness, and pride.' [TERFs' approach to trans men](#) is somewhat different: they portray them as 'poor innocent deluded women', thereby mirroring 'patriarchal behaviours towards "silly girls", no matter how old or how accomplished the women in question actually are.'

For non-binary people, the 'passing' issue takes a related but distinct form. Those who use they/them or other non-binary pronouns will be immediately marked out as socially deviant, until such singular pronouns become

normalised. Additionally, it is difficult for non-binary people to clearly and safely signpost their gender through physical appearance e.g. clothing, which almost inevitably entails either being read as non-cisgender, thus bringing potential danger, or as cisgender, bringing erasure (or being simultaneously erased and endangered by being read as binary transgender). A [ScottishTrans.org study](#) found that over three-quarters of non-binary people avoid situations for fear of being misgendered, outed, or harassed; and two-thirds feel that they are never included in services, with very few feeling able to be out at work. Transphobes either ignore the existence of non-binary people, or revert to the right-wing mocking tactics spearheaded by Piers Morgan; reducing the non-binary experience to a supposedly randomised babble of pronouns and prefixes.

Western trans people, no less than western cis people, are bound up in the patriarchal and consumerist gender system inherent to capitalism. Trans medicalised interventions often operate within a ‘soft essentialism’ logic, where certain biological features, including hormones and secondary sex traits (body hair, frame, vocal depth etc.), are viewed as containing ‘sex’ essence, but the overall sexed body is seen as malleable and changeable. Although, it is far too simplistic of TERFs to present trans identities as a purely ‘top-down’ phenomenon created by medical funding—especially when implicitly anti-trans ‘hard’ sex essentialism is still promoted by a huge pharmaceuticals industry, particularly in the US:

In addition to public funders such as the [National Institutes of Health] and the National Science Foundation (NSF), the financial supporters of the [Organization for the Study of Sex Differences] and the [Society for Women’s Health Research] include nearly every big name in pharma. This includes major international companies such as Amgen, Bayer-Boehringer Ingelheim, Boston Scientific, Eli Lilly, GlaxoSmithKline, Johnson and Johnson, Merck, Novartis-Pfizer, and Philips. The promise that sex differences may point the way toward marketable sex-specific therapeutic regimes, which can allow the repackaging of drugs in new forms for new markets, is undoubtedly a major motivator for businesses to sign on to the agenda of sex-based biology. [\[86\]](#)

TERFs ignore the existence of an entire field of transgender studies which challenges the sex essentialist assumptions permeating medical practice and which trans people are forced to navigate. J.R. Latham, a trans man, has recorded his own difficulties in obtaining a desired mastectomy (operation to remove breasts), including persistent pressures to conform with surgeons' and psychiatrists' own 'soft essentialist' worldviews. These included assumptions linking gender identity with sexuality—'you can't just be into men', said one psychiatrist, 'you need to reject your femaleness'. Latham also had to lie and say he didn't want to take testosterone 'for health reasons', rather than 'political reasons, or simply that it was not my preference'. ^[87] None of this is to suggest trans adults should not have access to any medical interventions if they desire them. Some trans-sympathetic practitioners argue that 'one can only "feel comfortable" when others can interpret bodily cues in a way that accurately reflects the client's gender identity.' For some trans people, sex-assigned hormones can 'provide a social cue for the self and outsiders, and these cues are then reflected back to the self, creating a congruence between how you see yourself and how the world sees you.' ^[88] As such, some trans advocates argue that, when a child strongly desires hormone blockers (not to be confused with 'cross-sex hormones'), 'doing nothing is not a neutral course of action. It amounts to knowingly submitting your child to a course of development that may mark them out for life with physical features that cannot be undone.' ^[89] There is again overlap here with intersex people's interests, as Costello makes clear: 'Intersex people often seek hormone replacement therapy to masculinize or feminize their bodies, or surgeries to move their urethras to allow neater or standing urination, or any of a wide number of other interventions. And intersex advocates support all of these choices. We just wish them to be free choices, not forced by doctors or parents or social shaming.'

In any case, if patriarchal gender ideology is presently inescapable, even for trans people, where does choice come in? Well, Marxism recognises that there really is no such thing as completely free choice: no escaping our brain's conditioning, at every moment, at the macro- and micro- scales, by social-historical-biological processes. Human [freedom](#), in the Marxist sense, is about the working classes' capacity to weaponize existing laws and structures, especially social ones, for liberatory ends: 'Freedom does

not consist in any dreamt-of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental existence of [wo]men themselves—two classes of laws which we can separate from each other at most only in thought but not in reality.’ Marxism is a philosophy of revolutionising both our external world and ourselves as the only means to overcome oppression and exploitation. Changing one’s gender identity alone is not a means to ending patriarchy (see section V), but it is often a means of survival consistent with the long-term struggle to abolish gender roles and dismantle capitalism. Again from Faye:

‘Trans’ and ‘woman’ are the broad terms and conceptions of gender available to best describe myself in the time and culture in which I live. Neither tells you everything because gender is a reductive thing, which always curbs individuality. Yet inhabiting that space, by describing myself in that way, and using female pronouns and using oestrogen to feminise my appearance, makes my life liveable . . . Don’t worry about the ‘why’; act on the ‘what’. What does being a trans person in a transphobic society produce? At the moment, too often, it’s still violence, prejudice and discrimination.

IV - Transphobia, Fascism and 'Common Sense'

Fascist movements arise and try to take power during moments, like our present, when capitalist 'democracies' are seemingly in terminal crisis. Fascism's populist demagoguery draws on, and takes to extreme levels, ideologies already inherent to capitalist imperialism: racism, patriarchy, eugenicism, ultra-nationalism and anticommunism. Today [fascism is again rearing its ugly head](#). Polish ultra-nationalists march under the slogan 'Pure Poland, white Poland'. In 2018 Steve Bannon, former chief strategist to Trump, told far-right nationalists in France: 'Let them call you racist, let them call you xenophobes, let them call you nativists. Wear it as a badge of honour.' Throughout western Europe far-right, anti-migrant parties are making parliamentary advances. In this climate, and assisted by social media, it has become very easy for 'scientific racists' to attract funding and support. While the resurgent race science has emanated from American 'alt-right' and neoconservative circles, it has had an impact in Britain, including via the recently-exposed [London Conference on Intelligence](#) (LCI) at University College London. A prominent figure in the LCI, which has run for at least three years, was the white nationalist Richard Lynn, who has called for the 'phasing out' of the 'populations of incompetent cultures.' Lynn's Pioneer Fund was founded by Nazi sympathisers with the purpose of promoting 'racial betterment', and has links with neo-Nazi Richard Spencer, former Ku Klux Klan leader David Duke, and Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party until 2014.

The anti-LGBT orientation of fascists is an extension of their patriarchal worldview. In Britain during the late 1970s, the fascist National Front derogatively dubbed the Anti-Nazi League 'ANAL'. In interwar Germany, there was a thriving 'transsexual' community, and the [Institut für Sexualwissenschaft](#) (Institute for Sexual Science) was formed to research and advocate for sexual minorities. It pioneered gender confirmation surgery and hormone replacement therapy, and also housed a large archive of LGBTI+ history. Upon taking power in 1933, one of the first things the

Nazis did was ransack and destroy the Institut, burning the entirety of its archive. The Nazis created new policies that led to the incarceration, castration and eventual extermination of LGBTI people. In 1979, the 'original TERF' Janice Raymond referred to trans men as the 'final solution of women'; rhetoric that [continues to be repeated by TERFs](#), and which cynically erases and trivialises the [Nazis' targeting of trans people](#) and the destruction of pro-LGBTI+ knowledge as part of the Holocaust. Extreme anti-LGBT attitudes never disappeared, and trans people are the canary in the coal mine. In October 2019, a Telegraph column argued '[it's time trans people carried ID cards](#)'.

Where trans activist movements have attempted to assert their rights, [violent reprisals have often followed](#): 'Less than a year after Austrian genderqueer performer Conchita Wurst's Eurovision victory, a transgender refugee was found murdered in Vienna . . . [In 2016] a Turkish trans woman who had famously been involved in resisting the police efforts to disrupt Istanbul Pride, Hande Kader, was found dead and burnt in a forest.' While extreme transphobia is often assumed to be limited to the US, 'across Europe, traditionalist groups are organizing varied efforts under the pretext of opposition to 'gender ideology.' Opposition to gender ideology includes efforts to keep gay marriage outlawed (as in the failed Slovakian 2015 constitutional referendum, or the large protests organized by French neo-fascist group Génération Identitaire), while also pursuing the delegitimization of trans people.' In Putin's Russia, trans people now cannot get driving licences because they are deemed mentally ill. In Hungary fascists attack Pride marches and Viktor Orbán's far-right government has banned gender studies, which it portrays as a 'Marxist plot' to undermine traditional values. Orbán declares that 'people are born either male or female' and that it is unacceptable 'to talk about socially constructed genders, rather than biological sexes.' The '[Marxist threat](#)' was also invoked [in Australia](#) in 2017 to defeat the Safe Schools programme, which was intended to make school life safer for LGBTI+ students. The Trump administration's Department of Health and Human Services wants to legally define sex as 'a person's status as male or female based on immutable biological traits identifiable by or before birth.' In this context, 'gender critical', the preferred self-descriptor of TERFs, is a euphemism akin to white supremacists calling themselves 'race realists'. And like 'race realists'

and race scientists, transphobes use misleading or indirect language and distorted data to bolster traditional fascist arguments.

Far-Right Networks and the TERF Explosion

The TERF media explosion in Britain and elsewhere is a direct result of neoconservative and far-right ‘dark funding’ networks. [OpenDemocracy](#) has revealed that ‘US Christian right “fundamentalists” linked to the Trump administration and Steve Bannon are among a dozen American groups that have poured at least \$50 million of “dark money” into Europe over the last decade’. The same political forces driving for abortion to be outlawed are attempting to bar trans people from public life. The anti-LGBT Heritage Foundation, co-founded by anti-Semite and eugenics supporter Paul Weyrich, funds alt-right figures like Steve Bannon and has international links with fascists in Eastern Europe and Britain. The foundation is [financed by oil magnates](#) like the Koch brothers—who have also funded British far-right magazine Spiked—and it has been a key ally of Trump. It is an influencing force behind the newly-formed trans-exclusionary 'LGB Alliance' in Britain. One of the speakers at the LGB Alliance launch event, Gary Powell, has active ties with the Heritage Foundation. Powell also writes for Public Discourse, a division of the Witherspoon Institute which is an anti-immigrant, homophobic and anti-abortion think tank. In January 2019, the Heritage Foundation held an event in Washington, DC featuring members of the transphobic 'feminist' group WoLF and prominent British TERFs Kellie-Jay Keen-Minshull (aka 'Posie Parker') and Julia Long, discussing opposition to trans rights. [Phaylen Fairchild](#) has traced how the 'whole idea to extract the T from the LGB was introduced at the far right, deeply religious Value Voters Summit back in 2017 as a means to weaken our community via division so our rights would be easier to oppose thus leaving all of us vulnerable.' It is not by coincidence that since 2017 ‘TERF ideology has become the de facto face of feminism in the UK, [helped along by media leadership from Rupert Murdoch and the Times of London](#)’.

Transphobia and Imperialist Feminism

Why would women want anything to do with the inherently patriarchal fascist worldview? For decades Black and other women of colour feminists have pointed out the potential for white women to perceive an immediate interest in upholding white supremacy. As Black Marxist feminist Hazel Carby explains, in mainstream British feminism ‘the involvement of British women in imperialism and colonialism is repressed and the benefits that they—as whites—gained from the oppression of black people ignored. Forms of imperialism are simply identified [if at all] as aspects of an all embracing patriarchy rather than as sets of social relations in which white women hold positions of power by virtue of their “race”.’ ^[90] In the 1970s, feminist Reclaim the Night marches in England’s inner-city areas reinforced racist stereotypes about Black male sexual aggression (notions rooted in settler-colonialist anxieties about been overwhelmed by the colonised), and were thus capitalised on by the fascist National Front which set about ‘protecting’ white women by beating up Black men. White women also played active and sometimes leading roles in the NF, at both the branch and national level. Pratibha Parmar and Valerie Amos have argued that patriarchal ideologies exulting white women ‘as mothers and reproducers of the race highlighted their interest in upholding white supremacy’, and, indeed, pointed out that many early British women’s rights campaigners were proponents of eugenics. ^[91] Feminist [Sophie Lewis](#) draws the link to TERFs: ‘the obsession with supposed “biological realities” of people like Ms. Parker is part of a long tradition of British feminism interacting with colonialism and empire. Imperial Britain imposed policies to enforce heterosexuality and the gender binary, while simultaneously constructing the racial “other” as not only fundamentally different, but freighted with sexual menace; from there, it’s not a big leap to see sexual menace in any sort of “other,” and “biological realities” as essential and immutable.’ Venice Allan, suspended from the Labour Party for transmisogynist bullying and harassment, [proclaimed](#) on social media that ‘British women’ are the strongest and most powerful women on the planet. A recent study of [online transphobia](#) (which found over 1.5 million transphobic posts over a 3.5 year period) pinpointed racism as the biggest correlate of transphobia in the US, and a major correlate in the UK. The study further showed the escalation of online transphobia, including calls for violence and genocide.

The most prominent TERFs are pro-establishment, white liberal women, often with senior journalism jobs. These same TERFs falsely depict transgender people, and often particularly non-binary people, as universally young, white, able-bodied and middle class. 'Socialist' *Morning Star* [claims](#) that 'gender critical' feminists are being subjected to 'modern day McCarthyism'. The reality is the opposite: the national media ceaselessly thrusts megaphones towards the faces of TERFs (and one or two pro-establishment trans women), while the 'mainstream press silences trans voices—and by seeking a spurious balance, in which experts are rebutted by non-experts, they undermine real debate.' ^[92] The majority of open transmisogynists claiming to be "leftists" are divorced from the struggles of the working poor and racially oppressed. Many TERFs are openly racist. Posie Parker, a co-founder of Woman's Place UK which is supported by *Morning Star*, has [called for the sterilisation of trans women](#), and [associates with white supremacists](#). Several prominent TERFs write for the far-right magazine *Spiked*, which was launched by former members of a dogmatic Trotskyist sect, the Revolutionary Communist Party, and is known for promoting the views of '[scientific racist](#)' [Charles Murray](#). These include Julie Burchill, who once described trans women as 'dicks in chicks clothing' a year after the suicide of Lucy Meadows, a trans teacher hounded by the press. ^[93] The "LGB Alliance" has also been endorsed by far-right media personality [Katie Hopkins](#), who once tweeted: 'Racial profiling is a good thing, call me racist. I don't care'. Islamophobic racism is Burchill's forte: she [refers to](#) 'dozy broads who gravitate to [Islam] for kinky reasons after watching one too many Turkish Delight ads'; argues that 'the dregs are drawn to Islam'; and co-opts an antisemitic trope, declaring 'the world has been in thrall to the Arab oil lobby for decades'. Another TERF who has written for *Morning Star*, Jo Bartosch, published a *Spiked* [article](#) with a header image of Black trans woman Munroe Bergdoff, claiming that trans women leading a women's march is 'like Rachel Dolezal addressing a Black Lives Matter rally'; while referring to trans rights as 'cultural imperialism'. Black socialist feminist [Zoé Samudzi](#) has observed that white TERFs' unthinking conflation of transgender people with the Dolezal case, arising from a failure to engage with Black scholars' criticisms of direct parallels between race and gender, represents a knee jerk invocation of the 'pathological' need to protect "virtuous cisgender white women" from 'the racialized and trans mob'. A group of Irish feminists wrote a scathing [open](#)

[letter](#) (with over a thousand signatories) to TERFs planning a speaking tour in Dublin: ‘Do you have any kind of concept of what a feminism in a country shaped by struggle against Empire looks like? . . . We have had enough of colonialism in Ireland without needing more of it from you’. As [Sylvia McCheyne](#) pithily puts it, “scratch a transmisogynist and find an imperialist-endorsing white supremacist.” It is also worth repeating [Heron Greenesmith](#)’s point that transphobia ‘will have the deepest impact on those living at the intersections of multiple identities: transgender people with disabilities, low-income transgender people, and transgender people of color, especially Black, Indigenous, and Latinx transgender women. And therein lies the [TERF] movement’s true racism.’

TERFs increasingly lean on fascist-style conspiracy theories. British TERF and academic Kathleen Stock, whose work has been cited in Supreme Court briefs, [described as ‘brilliant’](#) an article promoting the idea of a ‘transgender lobby’ financed particularly by George Soros and other Jewish investors. TERF Jennifer Bilek published an [article](#) in the *Federalist* which runs through a list of rich Jewish (including Soros), trans, and gay people supposedly ‘Institutionalizing Transgender Ideology’. Woman’s Place UK also advances the [Soros funding conspiracy](#). The trans rights movement is of course incomparably less powerful than the North American and European Right. Where limited trans rights have been achieved, they were not the result of funding from above, but of sustained activism by grassroots trans justice movements which have operated at the social margins since the 1960s. Most billionaires fund political causes, across the liberal-conservative-far right spectrum, and the singular focus on Soros is unambiguously anti-Semitic. *The Washington Times* recently ran an [anti-trans piece](#), targeting ‘the LGBT movement’, with a racist illustration depicting Soros with exaggerated stereotypically Jewish features. The article was shared on Facebook by British TERF page [Object! Women Not Sex Objects](#). *Morning Star*’s open letter opposing progressive reforms to the Gender Recognition Act has been cited approvingly by a ‘left’ fascist sect, the ‘Socialist Motherland Party of the British Isles’, which also emphasises the Soros conspiracy. ^[94]

TERF perspectives have also dovetailed with racist ideology in relation to the controversy surrounding 800m world champion Caster Semenya. As

explained in section II, sports ‘sex testing’ is inherently flawed because it is bound up in sex essentialist and misogynistic logic; but as the case of Semenya illustrates, racism and misogynoir are also inextricable from a biological-determinist doctrine. In 2009, during what she was told was a doping test, Semenya was subjected to ‘sex testing’ by the IAAF, and was reportedly diagnosed with an intersex condition. Press coverage was shaped by the reflexive societal desire to police the hard sex/gender binary, and by general ignorance about what it means to be intersex: [Time Magazine](#) asked ‘Could this Woman’s World Champ Be a Man?’. More recently, IAAF board member José María Odriozol referred to Semenya as ‘[biologically a man](#)’. Capitulating to the media frenzy, in August 2019 the IAAF reversed an initial decision to clear Semenya, and she was barred from the World Athletics Championships in Doha, as well as from any future events unless she submits to testosterone-reducing hormone treatments. Before the IAAF ruling *Morning Star* weighed in on the sporting ‘sex testing’ controversy by [appealing to the opinions of rich white athletes and TERFs](#): ‘Many have listened to sports stars Martina Navratilova and Sharron Davies and developmental biologist Emma Hilton, and are now wondering just what the 2020 Olympics are going to look like.’ I have discussed Hilton’s ‘scientific’ credentials above. Sharron Davies MBE, a former swimming champion, has [tweeted](#) a reformulation of an old dull-witted homophobic quip: that humanity would die out if a transgender female and a ‘biological man’ were the last people alive on an island. Davies has further referred to Semenya being ‘misdiagnosed’ in Africa in a ‘[third world country](#)’. But it is the western Europe-based World Athletics body (formerly IAAF) that has been condemned by the UN.

As [Kiri Kankhwende](#) points out, Semenya’s body ‘is no less unique and suited to its purpose than Michael Phelps’—yet the world celebrates his rare physiology, even as it hounds athletes like Caster and [Dutee] Chand, calling into question their very womanhood and humanity.’ South African Minister of Sport and Recreation [Tokozile Xasa](#) has observed how: ‘Women’s bodies, their well being, their ability to earn a livelihood, their very identity, their privacy and sense of safety and belonging in the world, are being questioned. This is a gross violation of internationally accepted standards of human rights law.’ Julius Malema of the African National Congress Youth League described the IAAF’s 2009 investigation of 18-

year-old Semenya as a '[racist attack](#)'. Strong parallels have been drawn to colonialism, and the case of another South African woman, Saartjie 'Sarah' Baartman, who in the nineteenth century was taken from her home and exhibited across Europe 'as an example of defective and uncivilised Black women.' After her death, Baartman's genitals were embalmed and displayed. As [Ruby Hamad](#) notes, 'race scientists claimed true differentiation of the sexes to be a status that had only been achieved by the more highly evolved white Europeans. Baartman's body was regarded as a physical manifestation of her inferior culture: she was not seen as a woman but something lesser, something both more animalistic and more masculine than the European women who flocked to gawk at her body.' In the western context, the modern construction of womanhood is inextricably tied to anti-Blackness. In 2014, head of the Russian Tennis Federation referred to the Williams sisters, Serena and Venus, as 'brothers'. During the 2016 Olympics in Rio, Polish runner Joanna Jozwick, who finished in fifth place, declared that the three African women medallists 'have a very high testosterone level, similar to a male's, which is why they look how they look'. Making her implicit point explicit she added: '[I'm glad I'm the first European, the second white.](#)' The British media latched onto video footage from the same race of competitor Lynsey Sharp crying whilst complaining about the inclusion of Semenya and the other African competitors whose 'sex' had been called into question. Sharp, like Jozwick, didn't come close to winning. She came in sixth place. 'I can't help but think', writes journalist [Veronica Wells](#), 'that the new wave of enacting these testosterone requirements have to do with athletics federations being moved by a White woman's tears, at the expense of a Black woman's body.'

TERFs are Anti-LGB and Anti-Woman

TERFs are not just anti-T and anti-I, they are also implicitly, and very often explicitly anti-LGB and anti-women's reproductive rights. TERFs are increasingly willing to ally with powerful far-right and neoconservative think tanks, foundations and media outlets committed to reversing abortion rights and marriage equality. During the 2018 Irish referendum on abortion, some British TERFs withheld support for campaigners who supported women's right to choose, citing the trans-supportive attitudes of Irish

feminism. In 2017, [TERF group WoLF](#) contracted with Imperial Independent Media—at the time run by Zachary Freeman, who had served as a lawsuit defendant supporting the leaking of abortion clinic employee names to the Center for Medical Progress, known for circulating heavily doctored videos purporting to show Planned Parenthood profiting from the sale of foetal tissue. Kaeley Triller-Haver, co-founder of yet another TERF group—Hands Across the Aisle, is an anti-abortion conservative who has reportedly admitted to raping a teenage boy. As [Carrie Marshall](#) writes:

The methods used to attack trans women, to attack LGBT+ equality and inclusive education and to attack women's reproductive rights are almost identical, because they come from the same people. Science denial and the creation and promulgation of pseudoscience. Dark money. The creation of fake grassroots groups and the influencing of real ones. Alliances with the far right.

TERFs are also often directly anti-LGB, despite presenting themselves as protectors of the 'original' LGB banner against a supposed trans incursion (in reality, trans people have always been inseparable from the gay and lesbian rights movement). During the 2008 LGBT Pride festival in London, anti-trans stewards policed the entrances of public toilets, and those barred from female toilets included a cisgender butch lesbian (and one trans woman, forced to use a male toilet, was sexually assaulted). In 2014, TERFs derailed a pro-lesbian London Dyke March by protesting against one trans lesbian speaker. ^[95] [Burchill](#) has managed to squash biphobia, islamophobia and ableism into a single hare-brained Facebook post: 'bisexuals aren't persecuted because they can SWITCH. The Islamofascist [sic] Middle East proves this. Bisexual just means GREEDY/TWICE THE FUN. I have as much sympathy for them as I do bulimics in a world of starvation.' [Janice Turner](#), a white cisgender straight woman, succeeded in getting the UK National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) to remove Munroe Bergdorf, a long-time advocate of LGBT rights and critic of institutional racism, as a Childline ambassador by falsely accusing her of being a 'porn model'—an old anti-LGBT tactic drawing on tropes that present sexual minorities (especially gay men) as corruptors of children. The recent campaign to pressure Girlguiding to rescind its trans-inclusive policy is reminiscent of homophobic scaremongering about the

‘seduction of the young.’ British transphobia draws on a firm [legacy of right-wing backlash against the gay liberation](#) movement:

At each stage of the fight for gay rights, the British political and media establishment became saturated with arguments that used the notion of a “conflict of rights” in which gay people were always expected to give way to the majority. These often included the rights of children: in a startling interview for ITN News in 1998, the Conservative peer Baroness Young referred to gay rights as 'a paedophiles' charter'; and in 1994 the Tory MP Tony Marlow said gay campaigners were seeking to 'legalise the buggery of adolescent males', and that he wanted to 'protect young boys'.

Detransitioners are cynically exploited by transphobes in the same manner that 'ex-gay converts' have long been weaponised by homophobes. Transphobes often reject trans rights on the grounds trans people are supposedly ‘an imperceptibly tiny minority’, an argument until recently used against gays and lesbians. During the 1980s, when some left-wing local councils began challenging homophobia, there were ‘accusations that councillors were seeking to encourage children to grow up gay.’ Thatcher’s notorious ‘Section 28’ amendment to the Local Government Act (which outlawed the 'promotion' of homosexuality by local authorities, including schools) originated in a 1986 bill by the Earl of Halsbury Tony Giffard, who cited child molestation and ‘unnatural practices like buggery’ (as well as referring to ‘inverted racism’ and ‘male oppression’). ^[96] Section 28, which amounted to the state sanctioning of homophobia, was passed in 1988 and remained in law until 2003; in the 1990s, attention was drawn to the extent of homophobic bullying in schools by the suicide of 15-year-old Darren Steele. Today, *Morning Star* supports Transgender Trend, a hate website whose activities include producing anti-transgender stickers to be used by schoolteachers. It is known that much transphobic bullying in school is perpetuated by teaching staff. Suicide attempt rates among trans teens are staggeringly high: the charity [Stonewall](#) finds that 45% of trans youth have attempted suicide and that 64% of trans pupils are bullied due to their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. A 2012 study found that over 40% of non-binary people had attempted suicide at some point, a third had experienced physical assault, and a sixth sexual assault based on their gender. ^[97] TERF and vice president of the National Union of Teachers and

convenor of the Socialist Feminist Network Kiri Tunks has opposed proposals to improve the legal recognition of trans people. Tunks also co-founded Woman's Place UK, which harasses trans students. In February 2018, WPUK organised an event at Bristol University. WPUK events are billed as promoting 'free speech', but are really a '[one-sided platform for dissemination of hate-based narratives and scare tactics](#)'. When a trans student at Bristol wrote an open letter questioning if the event was being held on campus, the University threatened disciplinary action against them on the grounds of 'suppressing freedom of speech'. A hearing has been held, but the University failed to support the trans student, and appears to have indefinitely postponed the case.

Accusations from TERFs, *Morning Star* and the CPGB(ML) that trans activists are 'brainwashing' children are all too familiar: it is the same argument used against 'liberal teachers' for allegedly promoting gay lifestyles which led directly to 'the nightmare of Section 28 under Thatcher when lesbian and gay teachers and students lived in constant fear of exposure.' ^[98] The alarmism surrounding toilets and prisons is also fundamentally misleading. Trans women will find themselves subjected to abuse and violence if they are forced into the toilet (or prison) corresponding to their birth-assigned 'sex'. There are cases like those of trans women Vikki Thompson and Joanne Latham, who both killed themselves after being put in men's prisons in November 2015, and Tara Hudson, who was sexually harassed in a men's prison. With regard to toilets and other public spaces:

There are some simple solutions here. As socialists we should always fight for public spaces to be safe and free from the threat of violence. . . . Fighting for better and safer public services would be in all our interests, and cis and trans women (and men) should campaign together—to defend women's refuges, to fight for better healthcare and safer streets. It is austerity and cuts that are making our public spaces more dangerous, not trans people. ^[99]

The hostile treatment of trans people in many left-wing circles is reminiscence of the years of moral panic against homosexuality in the 1960s-80s. Indeed, homophobia never completely disappeared on the left,

as an anecdote from a former CPGB(ML) member, [Lewis Hodder](#), makes clear: ‘After a two hour meeting with two members of the Central Committee in the party’s Birmingham headquarters, they made their views [against trans people] known and reasserted again and again that this was a view shared by the Central Committee—and although it wasn’t the party line, it soon would be . . . One particular moment that still stands out to me from this meeting was, along with the casual homophobia that wouldn’t be out of place in the ‘80s, when one of them said to me softly, almost in a confiding way, “you don’t understand yet, you’re still young. When you’re older you’ll understand the urge to have kids.”’ As McCheyne notes, during the heyday of post-war British socialism, the International Socialists/Socialist Workers Party, the Militant Tendency and the Revolutionary Communist Party ‘all proved, at best, dilatory and sometimes unreliable allies to the cause of gay rights and, at worst, violent opponents.’ One serious limitation of some of the [existing critiques](#) of transphobia on the left is their reliance on a trope that pins anti-LGBT attitudes among Marxists on the influence of ‘Stalinism’. ^[100] But the main hub of left-transphobia, the CPB, is a wholly reformist, essentially Labour-left-aligned grouping that has broken from so-called ‘Stalinism’ and revolutionary Marxism-Leninism more broadly. And homophobia was endemic in the post-war British Trotskyist movement (Trotskyism is by definition anti-‘Stalinist’). As late as 1983, for example, members of the Militant Tendency [kicked and spat on gay Young Socialist members](#). In the 1970s, the Socialist Workers Party (formerly the ‘International Socialists’) leadership launched an offensive against the party’s unofficial Gay Group. Many leading SWP members held to the viewpoint that homosexuality is a symptom of capitalist ‘decadence’. This is similar to how the [CPGB\(ML\)](#) presently speaks of trans people: ‘It has obvious parallels with the last days of Rome in its decadence and absurdity.’ In 1973, the SWP Executive Committee opposed a motion to recognise homosexual oppression, issuing a statement which suggested ‘that all gays are middle-class, and, therefore, a bit perverted. It was based on prejudice and gossip and . . . included statements such as “Socialists who make ‘gay work’ the main arena of their political activity tend quickly to exclude any other considerations”’. SWP Gay Group member Bob Cant’s [reflections](#) on the experience would no doubt resonate with many trans comrades today: ‘the personal strain was terrific . . . We were accused of being concerned only with homosexuality—

but if that had been true why would we have bothered to join a revolutionary working class organization?’

It’s ‘Common Sense’

The phrase ‘common sense’ is often invoked by transphobes, including those within the Marxist movement. Middle-class transphobes are affecting to speak for a purported no-nonsense working-class constituency. As McCheyne identifies, the ‘most vocal transmisogynists on the British left, almost all of whom are white, present themselves (and are also presented as such) as authentic, marginalised, working-class voices, “saying it like it is” despite endorsements from mainstream media and national publications’. These privileged transphobes do not, in reality, give a damn about the working class, they only desire to invoke an ‘authentic’ proletarian voice when convenient, while simultaneously holding the class-based grievances of the working poor in contempt. Burchill portrays trans people as ‘entitled’ while [claiming she herself is working class](#), despite having [sold her Brighton house in 2005 for £1.5 million](#). She has also likened the fictive ‘trans lobby’ to ‘[wretched inner-city kids](#) who shoot another inner-city kid dead in a fast-food shop for not showing him enough “respect”’. Transphobes further reinforce an [outmoded, essentially colonialist conception of the working class](#):

A well paid *Observer* journalist can mock trans people en masse as middle class kids, obsessed with identity politics, because everybody knows that real working class people are white, cishet and hostile to anybody who is not white or cishet. The reality, of course, is that this image of an “ordinary” working class as the default is a fantasy, the working class is a weird, wonderful and diverse class and only a politics that recognises the many and varied ways in which we experience exploitation and oppression can allow us to build a movement to end oppression, end exploitation and ultimately abolish class itself.

The CPGB(ML) has taken the stereotyped construction of the working class to parodic heights. According to Hodder, ‘the Central Committee could only picture the working class as a caricature—telling members of the party

to lose weight and to get “working class” haircuts, before going on to unironically describe Tommy Robinson [alias of the fascist Stephen Yaxley-Lennon]’s hairstyle’. This is sadly not satire, the CPGB(ML) literally sent [PSAs out to its members](#) with the following instructions: ‘If you have excess weight, eat healthier, exercise and lose it! . . . Take care of facial hair by shaving or grooming your beard/moustache properly. Male activists ought to get a good haircut rather than allowing it to grow to excess’. Maybe if Marx had cut off his scruffy beard the 1848 revolutions would’ve succeeded in bringing the working class to power.

The [CPGB\(ML\)](#) also claims to be following working-class opinion: ‘the working class as a whole has a lot of common sense, and their attitude will be: “I’m sorry but a man’s a man and a woman’s a woman and you’re not going to be able to mess me around.”’ Amusingly, in [another](#) of its transphobic articles devoted to a characteristically-spectacular display of mental gymnastics, the CPGB(ML) directly contradicts its appeal to legitimacy from ‘working-class opinion’, stating that ‘if I said that “fascists are overwhelmingly working class” or “fascists are overwhelmingly less likely to get a job”, therefore we need to be championing the rights of fascists—it’s totally the wrong way of constructing an argument; it’s meaningless.’ Indeed! The CPGB(ML) have now found a natural ally in George Galloway, who affects to be a spokesman for the ‘traditional’ working class, and who while serving as an MP for the left-wing Respect party in 2014 took [£300,000 in earnings](#) from press appearances. Galloway, who has engaged in [rape apologia](#), makes [YouTube video rants](#) about gender-neutral pronouns ‘offending the English language’, suggests that gender and race have nothing to do with class, and enacts a self-aggrandising, machoistic approach to politics (telling those who call out his bigotry to ‘come and have a go if you think you’re hard enough’) which is incompatible with socialism.

Transphobes present ‘transgenderism’ as an invention of middle-class intellectuals. [Kay Green](#) writes in *Morning Star* that ‘trendy queer theory academics had messed up the language of sex and gender so much that conversations just weren’t making sense.’ Of course, it was socialist feminists—many of them working-class—who pioneered the theorisation and critique of social gender roles. Postmodernist ‘queer theorists’ since the

1990s have just co-opted and defanged this earlier intellectual work. 'Left-wing' transphobes erase decades of pivotal Marxist-feminist theoretical advances. It is becoming increasingly clear that when chauvinistic 'leftists', including the Communist Party of Britain, attack 'post-modern identity politics' they are not actually referring to the anti-materialist academic turn that took place during the 1990s under the influence of post-Cold War capitalist triumphalism. Rather, this is a 'dogwhistle' signalling their short-sighted opposition to struggles that go beyond the immediate worker-boss antagonism: struggles that specifically address racism, sexism, LGBTI+ oppression and discrimination against the disabled. A variation of this dogwhistle is used by fascists, who refer to 'postmodern neo-Marxism' as a catchall to describe anyone challenging their patriarchal, white supremacist ideology.

Anyway, all these transphobic 'socialists' seem to have forgotten that 'common sense' has long had a particular meaning in Marxist theory. Lenin emphasised the dangers of relying on popular 'spontaneous' consciousness, because of its susceptibility to oppressive ruling-class ideologies which dominate the national press and culture. Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci likewise explained that 'common sense' (in the broadest meaning), while often carrying seeds of class consciousness, always contains 'an element of subordination' to ruling-class ideas. [\[101\]](#) This does not mean that liberatory politics don't emerge from within the working classes; they certainly do. What it does mean is that we shouldn't slavishly view ideas as good just because they are popular, mainstream or 'traditional'. But the worst thing about TERF 'common sense' is that these middle-class bigots are imposing their own hate-filled viewpoint onto working-class people. McCheyne again:

one has to wonder if the "moral panic" [against trans people] is working and working class cis people hate us . . . Or, is it a minority of the historically established left wing in Britain that supposedly represents the working class? Considering the majority of the transmisogyny in the left is from political representatives such as MPs in the Labour Party like Caroline Flint and significant figures in the trade union movement ([Paul] Embery, [Lucy] Masoud and Tunks), we can assume the latter.

This 'top-down' theory of prejudice against gender (and sexuality) non-conformists seems accurate. The newest [British Social Attitudes](#) (BSA) study shows that anti-trans attitudes among the general population are not all-pervasive. 83% of nearly 3,000 respondents claimed they were 'not prejudiced at all' towards transgender people—although, paradoxically, just 49% said they viewed prejudice against transgender people as 'always wrong'. But the media hate campaign is having an impact: the “always wrong” figure is down from 53% in [2016](#). The most recent BSA also saw the first [drop in sympathetic attitudes towards 'same-sex' relationships](#) since 1987 (the time of the homophobic press attacks that secured Section 28), with those viewing them as 'not wrong at all' down to 66% compared to 68% the previous year. The recent election of a hard-right and openly homophobic prime minister suggests that this reversal of the trend towards greater social acceptance will not be temporary. Another recent study has indicated an alarming [81% increase in transphobic hate crimes](#) from 2017/18 to 2018/19. Transphobic leftists have blood on their hands, just as homophobic leftists in the 1970s-80s did. British Marxism needs a wakeup check. Transphobia is a class issue. Most trans people are working class. Sexism and anti-LGBTI+ oppression are intrinsic to capitalism. Many trans people are already comrades-in-struggle. Socialism is not a zero sum politics, where a gain for one is a loss for others: during the overarching struggle against capitalist austerity and the total system of wage-labour exploitation, battles against racism, transphobia, misogyny and ableism etc. will only temper the revolutionary edge of our movement and strengthen working-class unity. All these struggles already exist, and it is those 'socialists' with a stale, one-dimensional understanding of the working class who weaken our entire movement by breaking it up into aggregative parts, thereby pushing many grassroots activists towards more liberal forms of politics.

V - Liberation: Revolutionary Humanism

Trans justice must form part of any programme for socialist emancipation. The oppression of trans people is rooted in capitalism's reliance on a 'natural' gender binary to ensure the social reproduction of the total wage-labour system. There is a distinct correlation between neoliberal capitalist 'globalisation' and increased violence targeting trans people. ^[102] Globally, working-class LGBTI+ people are also hit especially hard by the lack of economic security and decimation of health care caused by imperialist 'structural adjustment programmes' enforced by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund; and they are increasingly driven into dependence on the sex trade. Yet an anti-trans *Morning Star* article [insists](#): 'Of course trans people should be protected from discrimination, and welcomed into day-to-day female society—they have those rights already'. In reality, trans people still lack basic human rights, and what limited legal rights have been achieved do not negate the institutional oppression and violence daily meted out to trans people (and particularly trans people of colour). In Britain, '[conflicting bureaucratic standards](#) . . . mean that a trans woman with a "female" marked passport and bank account might be imprisoned in a male jail for lacking a "gender recognition certificate" (a process requiring hiring a lawyer to make the case for one's authentic womanhood in front of a committee, among other expenses and degradations).' This has been compounded by austerity, with waiting lists for gender identity clinics up to as long as 4 years. As Faye has emphasised, [trans rights are a class issue](#). A third of British employers are less likely to hire a trans worker. Trans unemployment is not monitored in Britain, but in Ireland it's at 50%. Trans people who are employed often have to hide the fact they are trans, because being 'out' risks workplace harassment: one in eight British trans people have been physically attacked at work. And due to systemic transphobia, trans people often lack support networks in the trade union movement available to other workers. Because of poor health services, physical transition can further ensnare trans people in a vicious

circle: ‘the more you look like society’s idea of an acceptable or conforming man or woman, the more likely you are to get employment opportunities. But to achieve this appearance usually requires subsidy.’ The answer for many is sex work:

labour in which the workers have no legal protection, and no union—and they risk criminal prosecution, as well as putting their own personal safety at risk, to earn money . . . Sex worker emancipation and trans politics are intimately connected—not because sex work is “empowering” but because they overlap in their analysis of labour relations, workplace safety and dignity. Both movements demand better healthcare, less social stigma, fairer distribution of public resources and evidence-based policy.

Furthermore, as Kalaniopua Young stresses ‘quantitative figures alone do not reflect the actual number of deaths, due to inadequate reporting capabilities and other failures in data collection, nor do they capture the ubiquitous senselessness with which governmental forms of systemic violence dispose of many more trans and nontrans folk alike through various kinds of slow death’. In many countries, a man can kill a trans woman of colour and receive sympathy by claiming ignorance about her gender identity, and ‘when a trans woman of color like Cece McDonald defends against a violent attacker, she is criminalized and imprisoned.’ ^[103] As [Gleeson](#) explains: ‘Violence against gender deviants is primarily disciplinary, and a clear connection can be drawn between the commonplace attacks on us and practices such as “corrective rape” of lesbians. Trans women are often raped. We face harassment on the street, and those of us imprisoned (often for acts of self-defense) face especially intense attacks from the prison system even by its standards.’

While trans justice remains an uphill struggle, major gains have been achieved since the 1960s, when the trans liberation movement first really took off. In Britain, the 2004 Gender Recognition Act (GRA) granted legal recognition of preferred gender. However, though the GRA doesn’t require trans people to have undergone surgery, those who have not must have a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria and must live as their desired gender for two years before being able to change their birth certificate, which can be a source of great distress. The government opened up its consultation on

GRA reform in July 2018 and closed it in October 2018 without any commitments being announced. The Women and Equalities Committee have recommended bringing the GRA into line with more progressive legislation abroad such as in Ireland. Recommendations include allowing for a third non-binary gender category and enabling trans people to change their birth certificate through an act of self-declaration. Morning Star have joined the right-wing press in claiming this would ‘erase’ ‘real’ women. But in Ireland self-declaration of gender identity has been in place since 2015, and data released by the government in 2017 ‘showed that 240 people in a country with a population of around 5 million had been issued with a Gender Recognition Certificate under the procedures. We would be living in very interesting times indeed should these figures change to the extent that they have any statistically significant effect on gender inequality data.’ ^[104] GRA reforms sought in Britain are already present in Argentina, Belgium, Malta, Portugal, Denmark, Norway, Ireland and Colombia. Women’s rights haven’t been compromised, [nor has the feminist struggle been weakened](#). In, Argentina ‘cis and trans women work together in the Ni Una Menos (Not One Less) collective against male violence, and trans women are visible every year at Argentina’s National Women’s Conference.’ Soon after the passing of more progressive gender legislation in Ireland, anti-abortion legislation was repealed, and legislation for ‘same-sex’ marriage passed.

The UK [GRA consultation also failed to address intersex rights](#) issues, despite the fact that birth certificates ‘can be both an ongoing nuisance for intersex people trying to live our day-to-day lives, and a point of bureaucracy-induced stress for their parents in the first month after birth. Under current British law, parents of intersex children are effectively forced to “pick a side”’. In July 2018, Intersex & Allies were the first intersex group to participate in the Pride in London parade, a significant forward stride, although it was somewhat overshadowed by the presence of [anti-trans protestors](#).

The Dead-Ends of Postmodernist ‘Queer Resistance’ and Social-Democratic Reformism

Marx and Engels explicitly pointed to the need for humans to transform their relations with one another and with themselves—but in tandem with the revolutionising of underlying class relations. There is an inherent problem with gender abolitionist perspectives reliant on *actual* postmodernist theoretical frameworks, which focus on discourses or medical practices in isolation from the class struggle. The postmodernist approach ‘no longer sees gender as necessarily violent, and favours individuated gender identities over generalised solidarity.’ For instance, Verity Spott’s *Trans* Manifestos* calls for a ‘resistant queer subject’ to subvert ‘symbolic violence’ by ‘enacting a new regime of symbols’, such as long lists of possible gender identities. ^[105] There isn’t necessarily anything wrong with subverting language in itself, it is only wrongfooted as a liberatory strategy. In Marxist terms, it is a ‘voluntarism’ that hopes to achieve emancipation without transforming underlying exploitative social structures. Sexism and anti-LGBTI+ oppression can only be overcome by dismantling the foundational capitalist division of labour, including the global exploitation of women’s unpaid reproductive (domestic) work, through organised working-class revolution. The struggle to abolish gender roles must also be linked with struggles against other forms of capitalist oppression. Trystan Cotten, who studies gender transitions in Africa and the African diaspora, notes how ‘gender—whether it’s a matter of gender presentation, the longing for relief from sex/gender incongruence, or something else—is very important in my subject’s daily struggle, especially when it combines with their poverty, citizenship woes, geographic displacement, and ethnic warfare. But they don’t single out this struggle as the most salient because of their problems with ethnic cleansing, racial profiling, sweatshop exploitation, and poverty.’ ^[106] Similarly, while legal recognition of non-binary identity is essential, having your ‘difference’ marked out for instance on passports carries its own dangers under the oppressive capitalist state; especially for LGBTI+ people of colour who are at greater risk of harm through Britain’s racist carceral and immigration regimes.

The second strategic (and tactical) dead-end is relying on parliamentary politics. While Corbyn has been broadly supportive of trans rights, and urged reform to the GRA, as leader of Labour he failed to adequately deal with the institutional transphobia in the party. The election of trans activist

Lily Madigan as a Labour women's officer for Rochester and Strood particularly provoked a vicious transphobic backlash. In early 2018, a GoFundMe page set up by [Labour Party transmisogynists](#) including Venice Allan and Jennifer James called for trans women to not be included in all-women's short lists, and quickly raised tens of thousands of pounds. While James and Allan were suspended, in October 2018 Corbyn's right-hand-man John McDonnell met with TERF hate group Woman's Place UK. Opposition to GRA reform has included a number of leading trade unionists who were important supporters of Corbyn, notably Len McCluskey, general secretary of Britain's second largest union UNITE (a key Labour donor). A WPUK [unofficial fringe meeting](#) at the Labour Party conference in late September 2019 was supported by Kevin Courtney, joint-general secretary of the National Education Union.

Transphobia is especially endemic in Scottish Labour. Many of its members, including former Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont, joined the hate campaign that successfully blocked proposed GRA reform in Scotland. The campaign succeeded despite the [support for GRA reform](#) from multiple established feminist groups including Rape Crisis Scotland, Scottish Women's Aid, Engender and Zero Tolerance. Transmisogynists in Scottish Labour have formed the Labour Women's Declaration Working Group, which claims women are oppressed on the basis of biological 'sex'. Supporters of LWDWG include former Labour peer Lewis Moonie, who has described trans women as '[nonces](#)' (recall the direct parallels between transphobia and homophobia discussed above) and [advocated violence against trans women](#). Another Labour peer, [Andrew Stone](#), has been suspended for transphobia as well as for sexual harassment and using racial slurs. Jenny Marra, Scottish Labour MSP for North East Scotland, organised an [anti-trans meeting](#) to take place on Transgender Day of Remembrance (a day to memorialise murdered trans victims of hate crimes). One of the speakers at the meeting was Sheila Jeffreys, who in 2018 dehumanised trans people before the UK parliament by referring to them as 'parasites'.

The more fundamental point must be made that social democracy (rebranded 'democratic socialism' in Corbyn's case) sets off from the wrongfooted premise of 'taming' the patriarchal capitalist system. A

century of pre-Blair 'socialist' Labour teaches us that social reformism cannot stifle capitalist economic crises. And Labour has always turned on the working class at the first sign of trouble: e.g. in 1974-9 successive Labour governments, initially elected on a more left-wing Manifesto than the 2017 or 2019 ones, shortly implemented massive public spending cuts at a time of price inflation, and launched a police offensive against the trade union movement. As Labour leader, [Corbyn](#) backtracked on his opposition to the imperialist NATO alliance, enabled his MPs to vote to bomb Syrians, and instructed Labour councils to set pro-austerity budgets at a time when 14 million are living in poverty in Britain. Labour's 2019 [Manifesto](#) kowtowed to transphobes: while it committed to implementing self-declaration of gender identity, it also included a TERF talking point about 'single-sex-based' rights. One of the 2020 Labour leadership election candidates, Birmingham Yardley MP [Jess Phillips](#), has spoken in support of WPUK; while another prominent Labour politician, [Laura Pidcock](#), has called for the enforcement of 'single-sex spaces exemptions within the Equality Act' alongside 'spaces for trans people'. Ultimately Labour serves capitalism by diverting radical activist energies into false hopes of changing the system 'from within'. Both social reformism and postmodernist 'symbolic' resistance are political dead ends. As trans Marxist-Leninist [Alyson Escalante](#) outlines, abolition of gender roles requires:

daring imaginations of new futures, discussion and communication and theoretical development which demands not just abolition but a way to actually achieve it, and a clear set of materialist theoretical principles and praxis to unite around. The abolition of gender will only be achieved as a result of the abolition of the material conditions which reinforce it with their ideologies of sexual difference. This means destroying the capitalist system which produces the nuclear family as a fundamental social structure. This means overcoming colonialism and white supremacy which rely of gendered discourses to justify their violence and establish ideologies of hypersexuality and deviance. This means recognizing that these things can only be overcome by a communist politics oriented towards the future. Abandon nihilism, abandon hopelessness, demand and build a better world.

Socialist Humanism in Practice (Viva Cuba!)

To avoid any confusion, when I speak here of humanism I am not referring to the reformist, anti-Leninist trend within the post-war western 'New Left'. I'm referring to the revolutionary humanism of Karl Marx, a tradition best continued by Marxists committed to the construction of actual socialist revolution—Frantz Fanon, Claudia Jones, Che Guevara etc. Socialist humanism means the total revolutionising of human social relations in line with the working-class transformation of the state and economy. Virtually all socialist revolutions, especially those with strong socialist-feminist currents, have seen major improvement in the status of women, and as Hisila Yami emphasises 'women are the first casualty of counter-revolutions in history.' ^[107] The struggle to overcome anti-LGBTI+ prejudice and discrimination has thus far been mostly marginal in socialist movements, but there have been major successes.

The socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), in recognising the rights of the oppressed to self-determination, [legalised 'same-sex' marriage](#) and provided [free healthcare for trans people](#). When Germany was reunified in 1990 these and other rights, such as abortion, were reversed. Since 1998, the [Communist Party of the Philippines](#) (PKP) and its New People's Army have supported same-gender marriage and the right of anyone to decide their gender (kasarian). Significantly, the PKP has inverted the narrative associating sexual nonconformity with 'bourgeois decadence'; recognising *heterosexism* as the product of capitalist-imperialism: 'Discrimination against gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders . . . is widespread in decadent societies. The revolutionary movement addresses this through education conducted among both the revolutionary forces and the masses.' In South Africa, the Marxian [Economic Freedom Fighters](#) (EFF) party has taken a pro-LGBTI+ stance, and been praised by noted trans author Landa Mabenge.

In Venezuela homophobia remains strong, largely due to the lingering influence of colonial ideologies, but great strides have nevertheless been achieved under the Bolivarian revolution. While President Nicolás Maduro has previously used homophobic rhetoric against political opponents, in 2013 he declared that the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) '[will never be homophobic](#)' because 'the revolution claims freedom, equality and respect for human beings'. In November 2017, Maduro

expressed his personal support for ‘same-sex’ marriage, and in September 2016 the Administrative Service of Identification and Migration Affairs (SAIME) announced that trans people may request [new identity cards](#) in accordance with their gender identity. Venezuela’s [Revolutionary Sex-Gender Diverse Alliance](#) has condemned US sanctions and imperialist meddling in the country, which has created a [medical crisis](#) hitting the working-class LGBTI+ community particularly hard. The need for anti-imperialist LGBTI+ solidarity is clear—the liberal British gay rights leader [Peter Tatchell supported the anti-Maduro coup](#) attempt. In neighbouring [Bolivia](#) too, where in 2016 trans people were issued new ID cards for the first time, the right-wing US-sponsored coup is likely to set back LGBTI+ rights (in addition to the vicious pogroms already being launched against indigenous communities).

Cuba, still a shining beacon of socialist humanity, provides gender-affirmation surgery for free, and the country’s [first trans couple marriage](#) took place in July 2019. In 2012, Adela Hernández became the first trans person to be elected to public office in the country. Mariela Castro Espín, daughter of Cuban Communist Party leader Raúl Castro, has for over two decades been doing pioneering work at the Cuban National Center for Sex Education (CENESEX), which promotes LGBT equality and the depathologisation of trans people. Espín, who campaigns for ‘same-sex’ marriage and aims to ‘bring the [revolution’s humanity](#) to those aspects of life that it hasn’t reached because of old prejudices’, exemplifies the creative synergy between socialist-humanist theory and practice. She [explains](#): ‘we help people to integrate into society, not to feel sick, not to feel depreciated, not to feel inferior, and to find in our institution a support-base and space for constructing knowledge. Because who better than people living these experiences to bring awareness to and their socialisation among the entire population?’ Like the PKP, Cuba emphasises the importance of socialist mass education: ‘we began training [trans advocates] as sexual rights activists with an emphasis on civil rights, using Paolo Freire’s methodology of popular education—a participatory method that also promotes very important human values in the relationships they build with other people.’ Espín understands that homophobia and machismo from the colonial era retain a strong legacy in Cuba, and that the revolution is a long-term process of transforming social relations:

The main stage for the struggle of sexual and gender diversity in Cuba was the 1959 revolution. The revolution was the start of a process of emancipation in all senses of the word, bringing into question and discrepancy, those human relations based on exploitation and that have historically been learned. In this process of socialist transition, we are articulating new relationships, new kinds of relationships, by taking down myths and prejudices, especially on issues of class, race and gender.

Globally, we are witnessing the emergence of what Peter Drucker calls ‘third-wave socialist feminism’: a feminism which recognises capitalist-imperialism as the root cause of compounding oppressions, including racism; and which is characterised by LGBTI+ inclusivity, along with concern for indigenous justice. [\[108\]](#) Meanwhile, British Marxists are still peddling nineteenth-century biological determinism.

Spark Like a Dialectic

Dogmatic, short-sighted Marxists present struggles against different oppressions as ‘diversions’ from the ‘real’ class struggle. But it is these dogmatists who divide the working class against itself, by pretending its constituent elements don’t exist. The [CPGB\(ML\)](#) is a useful case in that it’s explicit in a position implicitly held by much of the left: ‘We are told that so-and-so represents the “black community”, or the “muslim community”, or the “Asian community”, or the “women’s community” or the “LGBT+ community”, the “queer community”, the “trans community” . . . but there’s no such thing as any of those “communities”!’ This is, of course, ridiculous; oppressed communities must fight for their particular rights as communities, but they can simultaneously join wider anti-capitalist struggles. The [British Black Power movement](#), which existed throughout the 1960s-80s on a national scale, is exemplary. It fought community-based battles against racist immigration controls and police brutality, and drew attention to prejudice within the white working-class; but many Black Power groups were simultaneously committed to building alliances with white workers to transform and radicalise trade union structures—despite being denigrated by all the main socialist parties as ‘black separatists’. The CPGB(ML) [further claims](#) that ‘Gay workers fight for socialism as workers,

not as “gays” (why not both?!) and that ‘We can honestly say that under socialism there will be no “LGBT rights” because everybody will have full rights; end of story.’ This amounts to saying the revolution will magically end all oppressions, so in the meantime shut up about them—a line that alienated countless socialist-feminist and Black radical comrades during the high tide of post-war British Marxism.

Those engaged in class struggle often have expansive political identities: there is no contradiction between being a socialist and a feminist or anti-racist etc. And the majority of working-class people fall into one or more of the categories of women, LGBTI+, racialised minorities and those with disabilities. But also, the dogmatic Marxists present a false picture of the ‘traditional’ white working class as being only concerned with their immediate interests. Certainly, racism has a strong presence among the white working class in Britain (though no more than among the middle classes), but there have been key instances of multiracial proletarian solidarity: the participation of tens of thousands of white workers in the anti-fascist movement against the National Front; or the mass rank-and-file trade union support for the strike at Grunwick film processing plant by Asian women workers during 1976-8. Such moments of working-class unity were a long time in the making and, vitally, they necessitated the acceptance by socialists of the particularities of oppressions, rather than *subsuming* contradictions within the working classes with such facile slogans as ‘One Race the Human Race’. Since the 1970s, there has also been increasing acceptance by the mainstream workers’ movement of LGBT rights—a major turning-point having been the Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners movement in 1984-5, led by late gay Communist Mark Ashton.

The militant Stonewall Riots, the symbolic origins of the LGBTI+ movement, were initiated by working-class trans women of colour. Contemporaneously with Stonewall, *māhū* (‘in the middle’ gender) activists in Hawaii ‘struggled alongside their brothers and sisters at the forefront of an indigenous land dispute in cities like Waianae and Waimanalo, Oahu, as the state of Hawaii began evicting dozens of Kanaka Maoli (Native Hawaiian) families from their ancestral homelands.’ [\[109\]](#) During the 1970s, the trans liberation movement ‘avowed a deep relation to Black Power,

Women's Liberation, Third World Liberation, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and anti-capitalist struggle.' [\[110\]](#)

[Trans revolutionaries](#) usually stress transphobia and transmisogyny as pervasive and structuring aspects of society, as well as emphasising interconnections with the political order more generally (state racism, border regimes, medicalisation, the aftermath of colonialism, and the division of labour). From this view, trans liberation is not so much a struggle to win particular rights, but one part of a broader movement overturning inter-locking, oppressive systems.

Today, in Europe and North America the workers' movement is much weaker, and trade unions have been decimated by decades of deindustrialisation. However, while union bureaucracies in Britain are reformist and often chauvinistic, rank-and-file radicalism retains a presence, with recent victories by migrant workers, and ongoing national disputes in the transport and education sectors. On 13 November 2019 the British Trades Union Congress (TUC) issued a [statement](#) calling on the government to implement reform to the Gender Recognition Act. A trans workers' group has also been created in the TUC, Trans Workers UK. LGBTI+ recognition is however currently most developed in public-sector unions often organising better-off workers, so it is vital that these establish links with other sectors, including the informal, as well as with working-class communities in deprived urban areas who are alienated from official political structures.

One of the major victories of the double-edged repression and co-option of radicalism during the late 1970s and 1980s, firstly under Callaghan's Labour and then Thatcher, is that socialists have lost contact with the mutually enriching exchanges which emerged with feminist and anti-racist Marxist currents. This was also partly self-inflicted. In the early 1980s, the Socialist Workers Party purged its socialist-feminist caucus '[Women's Voice](#)' (soon after it had liquidated its Black caucus 'Flame'). Since then, the SWP has failed to adequately address sexism and especially issues of sexual abuse (which Women's Voice had drawn attention to and theorised). When the SWP engages with Marxist feminism, it attacks it for revising outdated elements of Engels' writings, or equates it with the 'dual systems'

approach (positing patriarchy and capitalism as two separate compounding systems, rather than as intertwined dynamic systems that informed each other's development) proposed in the early 1970s—long since rejected by most Marxist-feminists. ^[111] British Marxism on the whole has failed to absorb intellectual advances by seminal Marxist-feminists (and Black radical Marxists)—Angela Davis, Silvia Federici, Eleanor Leacock, to name but a few. The SWP even restated its anti-feminist position immediately after the [Comrade Delta](#) scandal. In 2010, the SWP's National Secretary Martin Smith ('Comrade Delta') was accused of sexual assault, and the Central Committee decided to conduct a private adjudication comprised of Smith's colleagues, who exonerated Smith and set about interrogating the accuser, leaving her in tears, during the hearing. Further allegations of rape by SWP members have since emerged. A Central Committee statement in early 2013 defending the internal handling of the accusation, and attacking feminism, was [signed by 500 members](#) including the party's main theorist of women's oppression, [Sheila McGregor](#). This is truly a time when, with regard to those parties that have lingered in one form or another since the 1970s or earlier, it is incumbent on principled socialists to rebel against these obsolete chauvinistic leaderships.

Red Fightback supports the right to caucus internally on the basis of different oppressions (racism, misogyny, anti-LGBT+ oppression and ableism). We do not see this as any hindrance to a revolutionary Communist politics, attuned to the necessity of building a coherent mass working-class movement. We see it as valuable, enabling the theorisation of particular social injustices, and providing space to develop strategic linkages between different aspects of anti-capitalist struggle, within an overarching historically-verified Marxist-Leninist framework which recognises the capitalist state itself (whether Tories or Labour are at the helm) as the centralised arbiter of all exploitation and oppression.

As Haneen Maikey of the Palestinian LGBT group Al Qaws puts it, invoking a Maoist aphorism, our goal as socialists should not be simply to 'build bridges' between the LGBTI+ community and the broader working class, but rather 'to swim in the same river to change its course together'. ^[112] As global capitalism continues to lurch from crisis to crisis, we would do well to take our guiding dictum from Audre Lorde: that 'difference must

not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic.’ [\[113\]](#)

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